PS4 AND XBOX ONE THE BIGGEST NEW RELEASES REVIEWED

gamesTM

www.gamestm.co.uk

Xbox One | PS4 … C | iPad | iPhone | PS Vita | 3DS | Arcade | Retro



STAMPY CAT TALKS ABOUT HOW YouTube IS CHANGING GAMING FOREVER

LARA CROFT RISES AGAIN

STUNNING NEW INFO ON XBOX ONE'S TOMB RAIDER

HELLBLADE BLOWN OPEN

INCREDIBLE ACCESS TO NINJA THEORY'S LATEST

ROCK BAND

HARMONIX RESURRECTS RHYTHM ACTION

CAN DRAKE SAVE NEXT-GEN?

UNCHARTED'S PLAN TO SAVE US FROM A GENERATION OF "CROSSGEN PORTS"

HIGHLIGHTS

- FINAL FANTASY X
- OLLIOLLI 2
- HOTLINE MIAMI 2
- THE ORDER
- XENOBLAD CHRONICLE
- DYNASTY WARRIORS 8 EMPIRES
- RESIDENT REVELATIO
- MARIO VS DONKEY KON TIPPING STA
- MONSTER HUNTER 4 ULTIMATE

DigitalEdition GreatDigitalMags.com ISSUE 159 IMAGINE PUBLISHING

We've got two of my favourite developers squeezed into this issue. Naughty Dog and Ninja Theory are really very similar in their approach to making games. They both believe in using motion capture, in the performances of actors to convey their stories, and in creating rich and detailed worlds for those characters to inhabit.

These are two companies at the cutting edge, but their paths are beginning to diverge. While Naughty Dog continues the *Uncharted* series and develops its ideas through titles like *The Last Of Us*, Ninja Theory is looking to find a new realm to play in. It's tried being a triple-A developer with games like *Heavenly Sword*, *Enslaved* and *DmC: Devil May Cry* and that didn't play out like it should have. For the record, I personally enjoyed all three of those games, but the mass reaction to them was mixed at best. Some early examples of extreme fan culture and bandwagon-jumping overtaking informed opinion.

So now we have *Hellblade*, a game Ninja Theory is pitching as triple-A indie. Higher budget than most indie games, but smaller than what's been done by the studio before. A couple of issues back, Ninja Theory told us that only 300,000 copies would need to be sold to break even. What that means is the creative shackles of reaching mass market appeal are off. And so we have two studios this issue working at opposite ends of the creativity in games spectrum. It was fascinating to hear from them both.

Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR

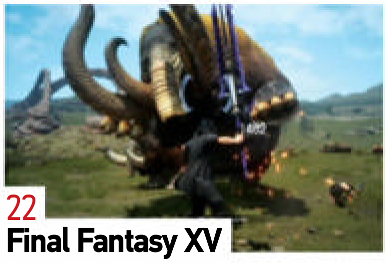



P-1
They meet at last!
Mitsuru Kirijo VS Chie Satonaka
D.O.B. 1991/5/8
H 166cm W ?kg
PERSONA
Artemisia
PROFILE
Queen of Executions
MITSURU KIRIJO
Who will eat and


1994/7/30
D.O.B.
W ?kg
H 159cm
PROFILE
PERSONA
Tomoe
Spunky Dragon wit
CHIE SATONAKA
who will be eaten!?

Contents

www.gamestm.co.uk 159 | 15



22
Final Fantasy XV

PREVIEWS



26
Rise Of The Tomb Raider

FAVOURITES



DISCUSS



88
The Order: 1886

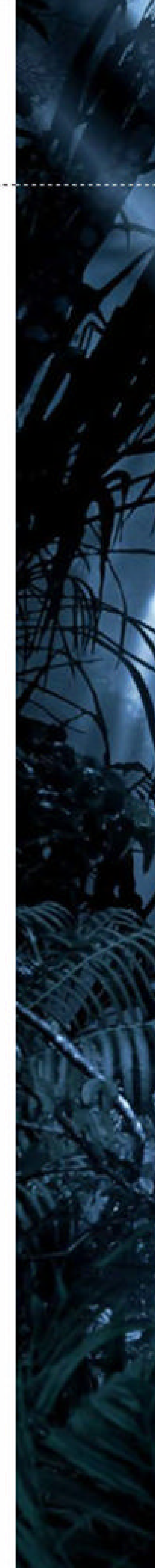
FEATURES



109
Mario Vs Donkey Kong

REVIEWS

RETRO





> Have your say on anything videogame related at **www.gamestm.co.uk/forum** and you could feature in **games™**

facebook.com/gamesTM | @gamesTMmag | www.gamestm.co.uk

Turn to page 80

UNCHARTED 4 A THIEF'S END

Naughty Dog reveals its plans to shake up the generation with another classic game

Join our games™ Reader Panel today!

Take our 3-minute survey at
gamestm.co.uk/survey
and win a place on our panel



Hi there. The **games™** team is a dedicated one and we know as one of our readers you're just as committed to **games™** as we are. With that in mind this year we want to make the magazine even better with your help. Simply answer a few questions, and you could be selected to join our first ever **games™** panel. I'm looking forward to reading your ideas and feedback.

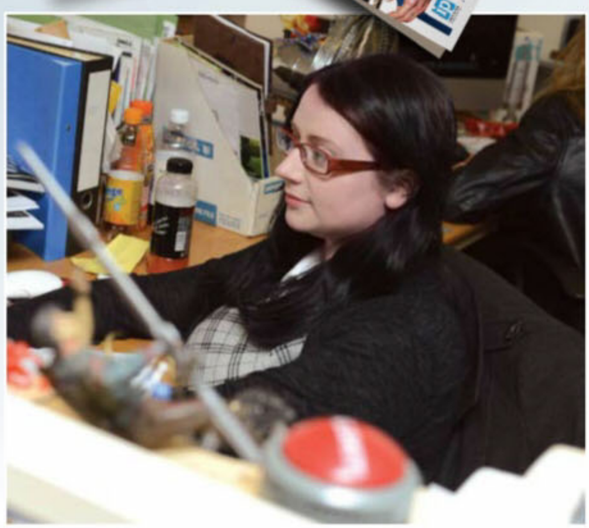
Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
Editor





Join our panel and help us make the magazine even better!





Take the survey on any device

Complete our survey to join our games™ panel and:

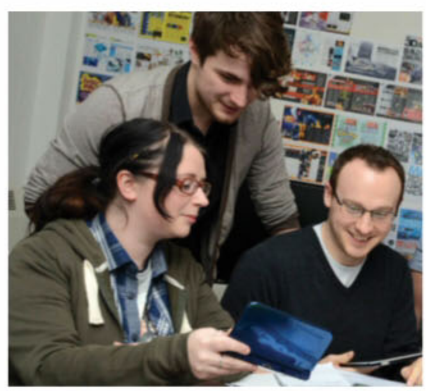
- See new ideas and changes before anyone else
- Get invited to attend special events in your area
- Test third-party products for review
- Have a chance to meet the **games™** team
- Shape the future issues of the magazine
- Enter into exclusive competitions

Step 1 Complete survey → Step 2 Get involved → Step 3 Earn rewards



Take the chance to get closer to the team than ever before.





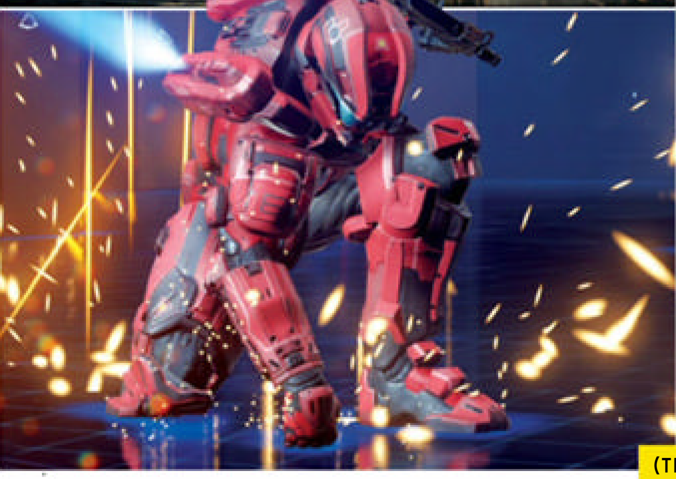
Only takes 3 mins!

Complete our survey and win your place today

www.gamestm.co.uk/survey

Discuss







(THE WAIT FOR INNOVATION)

Bringing the wow factor back to triple-A

➔ What is this generation about? The enthusiasm for triple-A titles as they are appears on the wane – will indies rise to fill a gap left by the death of mid-range publishers?

Look to the movies, and the blockbuster is dying. Check out sport, and football's showcase Premier League isn't what it used to be. Think about triple-A gaming, and the lustre seems to have faded somewhat. We're living in a period of flux; people are being drawn into the bombastic and big of budget less and less. So in an industry supported in the most part by these hugely successful, hugely expensive games, what does it mean for the future?

Last year's biggest releases had none of the pomp and ceremony around them that we've become accustomed to over the last five or so years. The hype was present, no doubt, but when the likes of *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare*, *Assassin's Creed: Unity* and *Destiny* were actually released, the reaction was a bit of a damp squib. The same can be said for those titles we're being told to have enthusiasm for – the likes of *Uncharted 4* and *Halo 5* are getting more of a half-interested shrug from some in the gaming community, rather than fevered breathlessness as the next shiniest triple-A title is revealed.



Above Something like *Roundabout* would never have been released by a triple-A company.

But the enthusiasm hasn't dulled – it's moved elsewhere. *No Man's Sky* has half of social media going into meltdown every time more footage is released, while the relatively low budget *Bloodborne* has countless gamers salivating with the mere mention of it. *Below* prompts more in-depth chattering than the latest *Battlefield* game does. We still want our games, but we seem to be bored of those we're being *told* to like – those we're *expected* to buy. So what does this mean for gaming? What can the triple-A market do to

DATA STREAM ➔ SONY HAS EARMARKED 2016 AS THE YEAR FOR THE PROJECT MORPHEUS VR HEADSET

Contents

Your guide to the essential stories

For daily news updates and exclusive interviews

facebook.com/gamesTM

@gamesTMmag

www.gamestm.co.uk









fix it, if it indeed can be fixed? Just what is this generation even about? It certainly isn't the high-definition thing anymore.

Ninja Theory's Dominic Matthews puts part of the issue down to standardised – somewhat archaic – pricing structures for big-name releases, with each coming in at a recommended retail price of £55. "They cannot compete on price because of the fixed retail cost," he said, "This fixed price has meant that titles have to compete on their feature lists and as a result triple-A games have got bigger and bigger. This need for bigger games has resulted in ever-increasing development costs and in turn ludicrously high sales forecasts needed to justify the cost of development. It is a vicious cycle that has resulted in only a handful of genres being able to survive in the triple-A space."

It's not the only problem this part of the industry faces, but cost is an issue – the backlash after *The Order: 1886*'s playing time was revealed (whether accurate or not) shows there is a vocal audience out there looking for value for money. Admittedly that's something very much in the eye of the beholder, but it can't be argued that gaming as a pastime is an expensive one. People want to think they're getting enough bang for their buck – and if that bang was X last year, they expect it to be X+1 next year. Otherwise it 'isn't worth it'.

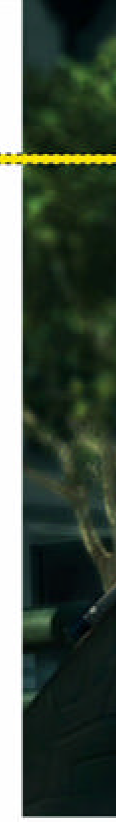
It's not the death cry of the main breadwinner for the industry, of course, and there will be studios and publishers thriving with triple-A products even in these changing times. Matthews explained: "It's still viable, but only for the few game genres that can appeal to a mass-audience. We now find ourselves in a situation where triple-A games have to sell in excess of five million units in order to make their development cost back – and there →



Inset Of course, none of this is to say the more traditional indie darlings – like *Spelunky* – will ever die out. There are simply more strings on the indie bow now.

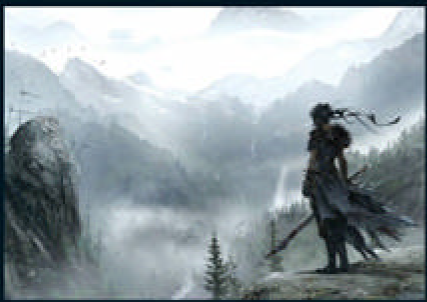
> "This need for bigger games has resulted in ever-increasing development costs and in turn ludicrously high sales forecasts"

→ NEW BLIZZARD SHOOTER OVERWATCH WILL BE GETTING A MASSIVE BETA STARTING THIS AUTUMN →



THE NEW MIDDLE?

When THQ went, the last of the mid-level publishers was snuffed out. Gaming has survived a few years now without this 'single-A' category, but it could be making a comeback – thanks to the efforts of developers on titles like these four games. They're growing into the void left, but will they have the financial clout to survive and thrive?



HELLBLADE

AS DOMINIC MATTHEWS told us, Ninja Theory is aiming for *Hellblade* to be an 'independent triple-A' game – definitely one that looks like it could fill the void left by the passing of THQ, Midway and co. There's definitely the track record from the studio, with each of its releases greeted warmly – though some more than others. But it will remain to be seen how Ninja Theory fares in this project – which takes inspiration from Celtic mythology – as this is its first full console game free of any direct publisher deal.



BELOW

IT'S NOT *BELOW*'S looks that gets pulses racing, pretty as it is, nor is this a game with tens of millions of dollars of talent behind it. It's a game of exploration and adventure from Capy Games – it's pretty much the archetypal indie release, by the look of it, and that isn't meant disparagingly. But what pushes *Below* into the uncharted territory of the new middle is its backing, by Microsoft – the platform holder isn't just helping Capy behind the scenes, it's actively promoting the game to the public every chance it gets.



NO MAN'S SKY

FOR THE PAST few big gaming shows, there's been a lot of hype for the next game from the studio that brought us *Joe Danger*, the platformer/racing hybrid. If you'd have told us this back in 2010, we would have laughed you out of the industry. But that's how it is – *No Man's Sky* has been showing us a colourful universe of exploration and imagination; galaxies full of possibility, and – as it turns out – exactly the kind of thing that gamers the world over have been waiting to get their hands on.



ELITE: DANGEROUS

IT MIGHT SEEM odd to double-down on spacefaring titles in such a limited space, but *Elite: Dangerous* is a great example of what can be done in the independent scene with – relatively speaking – not a lot of money. Just a few million pounds went into (and continues to go into) the creation of Frontier's long-awaited sequel, yet for the price we get a(nother) whole universe to explore. It's not a direct comparison, but put face-to-face with *Star Citizen*'s near-$100 million, it makes *Elite*'s achievements all the greater.

really aren't many games that can do that.

"Although gamers do get to play incredibly well presented blockbuster triple-A games, I do think it is a great shame that a lot of genres haven't been able to survive under the market pressure," Matthews comments. "There are a lot of players that want highly creative games, but many of these have been squeezed out by the current triple-A model."

But not everyone thinks like this – and we don't just mean the Activisions, EAs and Ubisofts of the world, as Dan Teasdale, of indie developer No Goblin, pointed out: "I think triple-A is even more viable for this generation compared to last gen! This is the first generation that triple-A studios haven't had to throw out their entire workflow and pipeline in order to ship on a new console." Taking into consideration the cost of making games, rather than people on the other side buying them, is an interesting point to consider, as Teasdale explained how costs have been shrinking in all manner of ways. "Robust tech, universal lighting models that don't require tons of custom shaders, bigger cuts of revenue from digital sales, near instant iteration – all of this makes it easier to ship a successful game this generation compared to last generation," he said.

But Teasdale did offer one particular criticism of the big-game model – and like Matthews' critique, it relates to rather old fashioned practices from the industry's biggest names: "In a world where a developer can turn around a fix for a game on Steam almost instantly," he explains, "it seems backwards to put them through a week-plus certification and release process for an identical fix on a console."

There's another element to consider – the ever-growing influence of the indie market, with publishers getting involved with creators directly to release their games, and an audience ever-growing, getting into gaming like never before – and in more ways than they've been able to before. With the death of mid-level publishers like THQ and the decent-budget titles it brought out, are we starting to see the indies fill that gap? Matthews told us his thoughts: "I believe that we are approaching a new dawn where studios can make triple-A quality games for smaller audiences under an independent model. *Hellblade* is being developed under a new model that we're calling independent triple-A. It's an experiment to see if we can deliver triple-A quality but under the restrictions of an independent budget."

This experimentation and learning is something Teasdale also spoke to **games™** about, pointing out that the growth of independent channels and audiences has led to small studios having to figure out elements like marketing spend, platform fit and positioning:

THERE'S A NEW RADIO STATION COMING TO GTA V FROM THE ALCHEMIST AND OH NO, STARTING ON PC



Inset This year's release of *Battlefield* has met with popularity, of course, but muted popularity. A similar fate has befallen its main rival, too.

> "It's a pretty great sign that full time independent development is now in a 'stable' environment rather than a 'boom' environment"

"It's no longer 'good enough' to just ship a great independent game if you need that money to live," he says.

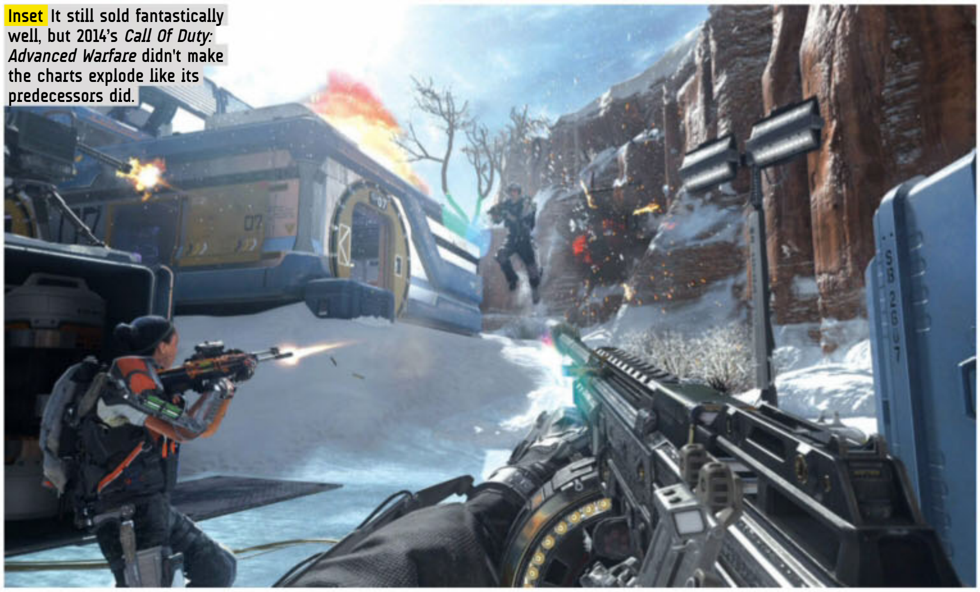
"The once distinct line between developers and publishers is becoming increasingly blurred," agrees Matthews. "With the platforms holders working hard to help independent studios to self-publish their games, many studios have to very quickly learn to become publishers. Small teams, like our *Hellblade* team of 12 people, now have to worry about PR, marketing, merchandising and distribution, all areas that were once handled by teams of people at publishers," he said, "It is daunting but incredibly exciting."

So what about this brave new world we live in? The triple-A model won't die, but will serve an 'engaged core', to use some marketing-speak. Will indies continue to fill the gap left in the middle, becoming the new 'single-A'? Matthews said yes: "Independent development will continue to do well by serving niche audiences. For many developers it is not about making millions. It is about making games that they want to make and that their fans want to play. I can only see this dream becoming a reality for more developers in the independent, digitally distributed game space."

Teasdale was also positive about the prospects for the smaller studios out there: "I think it's a pretty great sign that full-time indie development is now in a 'stable' environment rather than a 'boom' environment. You can't just do a cheap cash-in and make a chunk of money; you have to spend time thinking about how to distinguish and position your games to be interesting to the people who play on each platform."

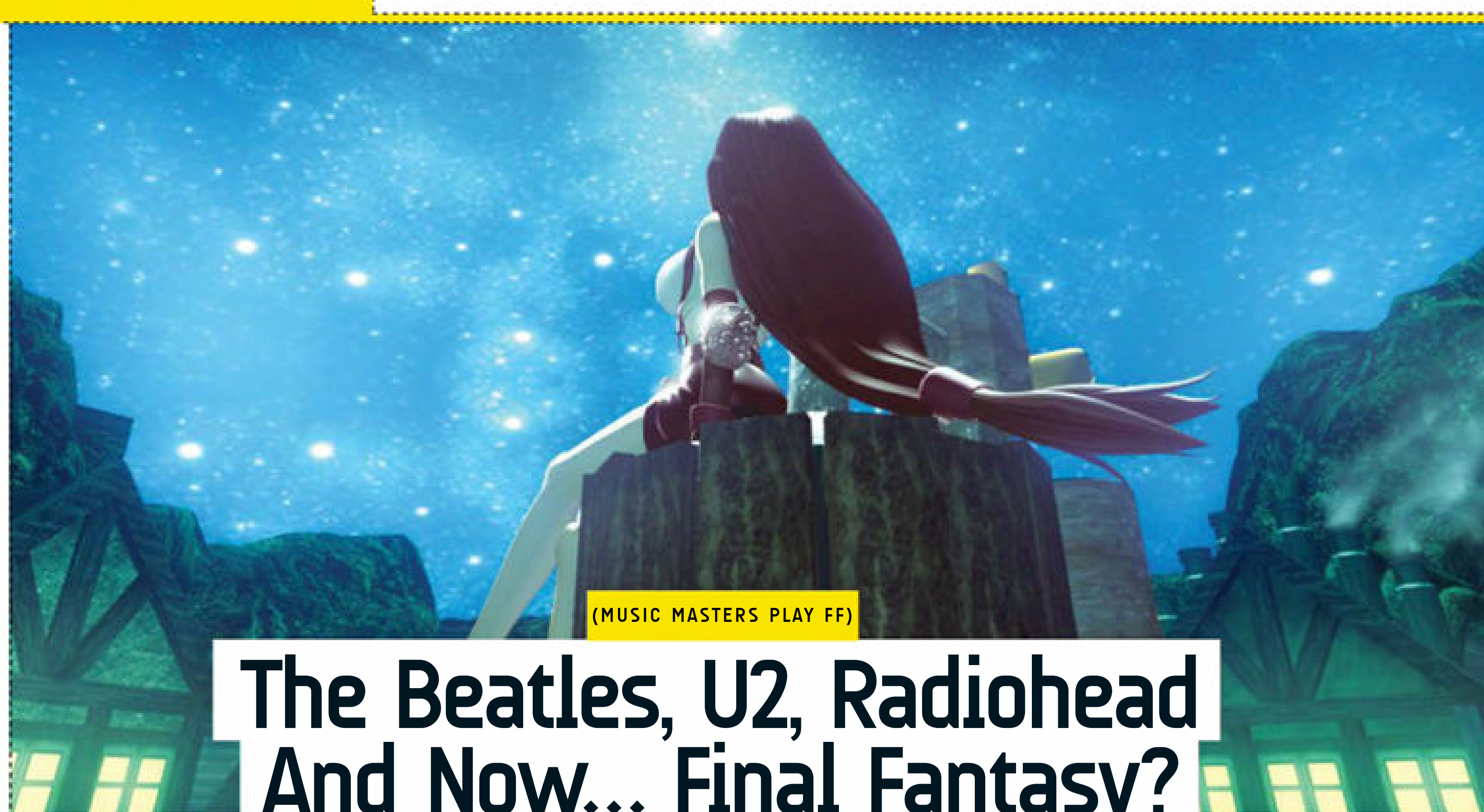


Inset It's not intended as disparaging to refer to something as 'mid-level' – *Darksiders 2* was the archetypal mid-level game – relatively small budget, fairly niche appeal – but it was excellent.



Inset It still sold fantastically well, but 2014's *Call Of Duty: Advanced Warfare* didn't make the charts explode like its predecessors did.

DARKSIDERS CREATOR JOE MADUREIRA'S NEXT GAME BASED ON HIS OLD COMIC BATTLE CHASERS



(MUSIC MASTERS PLAY FF)

The Beatles, U2, Radiohead And Now… Final Fantasy?

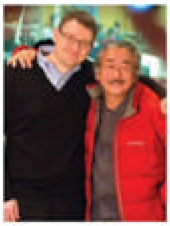
The London Symphony Orchestra has just recorded a selection of *Final Fantasy* music at London's Abbey Road Studios, in the presence of original composer Nobuo Uematsu; a once-in-a-lifetime production. We spoke to Thomas Böcker – producer of *Final Symphony* on behalf of Merregnon Studios – about the impact this recording has on the shape of games music, and gaming's place amid the classical music scene.

Could you tell us about your background?
I'm a producer of videogame music concerts and recordings, and have been for over ten years. I started in 2003, when I produced the very fist games music concert outside of Japan, which was in Leipzig, Germany as part of The Games Convention. Around that time, I'd basically produce a games music concert once a year. Right now, though, I'm producing a concert tour called *Final Symphony* which comprises of music from *Final Fantasy VI, VII* and *X*. The tour is officially licensed by Square Enix, and it started in Germany in 2013 and has [toured the world since]. Last December, though, we recorded the concert music at Abbey Road studios with the London Symphony Orchestra with Nobuo Uematsu in attendance.

→ You know you need to start taking games music seriously when the London Symphony Orchestra records a bespoke album at Abbey Road Studios…

How was it working with Nobuo Uematsu on his music in a studio he's stated is an inspiration to him?
Ah, well he attended my first concert way back in 2003 – I see him as kind of a mentor, you know? He's a really friendly and really down-to-earth guy that's super supportive – this [has been] a highlight of my career. As you said, he's a huge fan of Elton John and The Beatles and Pink Floyd and these rock groups and pop singers, so he's always been interested in Abbey Road.

When I told Uematsu we were going to record [the symphony] at Abbey Road… well, if I said he was 'freaking out', that's not what a Japanese person would typically do, but you know what I mean! [laughs] He got very emotional and he got very excited about it. He is an incredibly busy person, and his schedule is very tight, but when I told him this was happening, he cleared his schedule, said 'I *must* go!' and made it possible to come and supervise these recordings. I think, for the whole team, it was a very special experience – for myself, it was a dream coming true.



Above Nobuo Uematsu and Thomas Böcker oversee the production of Final Symphony at Abbey Road Studios.



Does Japanese game music lend itself well to symphonic arrangement?
When I was very young, I liked Japan quite a lot and the whole culture has a special appeal to me. I have a soft spot for Japanese role-playing games because they have so many different melodies and themes; you have a whole range of different emotions in the game that need to be covered by the music, right? So you have the love themes, the malaise themes, the battle themes… all these arrangements tell a story of their own. It's like *Star Wars* or *Lord Of The Rings*, you know? Where you have memorable themes you can bring out when you need to. In my opinion, Japanese composers are especially great at creating these themes.

Are we right in thinking the musicians at of the London Symphony Orchestra were previously unfamiliar with game music?
I think so, yes. Most of them didn't really know or play games, but generally the orchestras I've worked with over the years get newer and younger members all the time, and as they join, you notice more of them are gamers! When I worked with the Royal Stockholm Orchestra, I met one lady – a violin player –

→ UNREAL 4, UNITY 5 AND SOURCE 2 ENGINES HAVE ALL BECOME FREE TO DOWNLOAD FOR DEVELOPERS



"Even film composers should be jealous of game composers – the attention they get is unique"

Thomas Böcker, Merregnon Studios

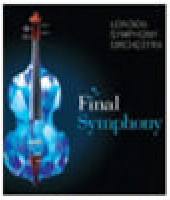
who is a *big* fan of *Final Fantasy*, for example, or when we played some *Super Mario Bros.*, the percussion guys were amazed that they got to finally play that, rather than Beethoven or Mozart. I'm not saying they didn't like those composers, but it was something different for them – they knew the games, and they had an emotional connection, and that [comes across] in the performance.

And how do your more traditional audiences respond to the game music?
Our fans are more interested in the topics we perform because in our concerts, the audience is *really* quiet. They're even quieter than in classical concerts. Our young audience wants to hear every note, every detail of the music, so they're quiet and really respectful – which the musicians love. But when the music stops, the crowd goes crazy! [laughter]. It's like a rock concert; loud and intense! That's something a classical orchestra has never experienced. One of the London Symphony Orchestra musicians wrote that the *Final Fantasy* fans were the 'most attentive he's ever performed for', so I think that says something.

Do you think games OSTs have the respect they deserve?
When I started 12 years ago, I think the games music scene really didn't get much respect at all. But over the years, you can see that a budget grew for orchestral recordings, for example, and developers started to care more for he audio part of the games. What we also can't forget is that we now have these 'composer superstars', like Uematsu, who has his own fan club, who gets to travel the world and wherever he appears has a crowd giving him standing ovations [laughter]. I guess that's special – this doesn't happen with graphic artists, you know? Even film composers should be jealous of game composers – the attention they get is unique, right? Even John Williams is on the same level as Uematsu when it comes to attention from the press and passion from the fans.

Final Symphony **is available now, in mastered for iTunes format and via other digital music retailers.**

Above Merregnon Studios enlisted virtuoso pianist Katharina Treutler to perform concerts based on *Final Fantasy X*.

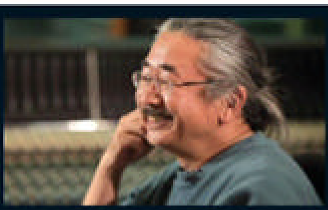




Below The most recent in a long line of ground breaking artists pose outside the famous Abbey Road Studios in London. Artists such as The Beatles, Muse and many more have graced its recording stage.



THE CREATOR SPEAKS!



"It's like a dream come true!" Nobuo Uematsu told us when we asked him what it was like to come to Abbey Road to record the movements. "I never imagined 20 years ago that I would be able to work with London Symphony Orchestra someday. The game industry wasn't very big 20 years ago. I ended up making music for games because I couldn't find a job in music!"

"I think what's really amazing is that [this] music has survived for as long as 20 years. It's just wonderful that there are so many people who like *Final Fantasy* music, and it's been arranged by such talented people. It's hard to describe in one sentence; I just feel so lucky to be born!"

"There are now so many people who have studied music to be a game music composer, I think the existence of a concert like *Final Symphony* is inevitable. I think it's a natural process to have concerts like this. And it offers something really new. Although there are many game music concerts nowadays, they tend to be quite loyal to the style of game music. It doesn't deviate too far, so it still feels like game music, and it's often arranged to be easy to listen to. On the other hand, what makes *Final Symphony* so different is that it's interpreted more freely, in an artistic manner. There are even many aspects that are closer to classical music. I find it very interesting, that in *Final Symphony*, entertainment music is shifting more towards classical music. And I think that's very new."

"It's not just for game fans; these are superbly arranged scores played by the London Symphony Orchestra. Those who are not game fans might also start listening. It offers the opportunity. I think it's done very well."

KONGETSU

VITA = LIFE



How Japan Kept The Vita Alive



It was always going to happen – no matter how many trillions more units the 3DS shifted, the Vita was always going to be fine. After the *Monster Hunter* revolution on PSP, many series have laid foundations on Sony platforms too lucrative to risk by changing sides, and Japan's relentless onslaught of new Vita releases attests to this. There's no *GTA* on Vita's horizon, nor does it need one – while it may have been designed to offer home gaming experiences on the move, Sony's latest handheld has shifted into a decidedly different role since its inception. It's goodbye triple-A and hello niche however you look at it, but with no other console filling that role right now, it's hard to argue that's a bad thing.

Capcom's unsubtle affair with Nintendo has left Vita – the follow-up to the handheld that *made* the hunting genre – without a main series *Monster Hunter* game to call its own, nor with a worthy successor. The pretenders keep coming, and doing relatively well, but there's a new challenger in the portable market these days. Visuals novels have long been big business in Japan. Just wander around a few Akihabara stores and you'll likely find more shelf space devoted to these games than to other entire platforms. The technical grunt of the Vita makes these glorified picture books look amazing and where once players would look to turn G-rank monsters into fancy hats on their commute (and in fact still do, thanks to 3DS *Monster Hunter*), interactive fiction is where it's at right now and it's been the unlikely saviour of the Sony system.

It's starting to spread, too. Back in the day, these kinds of games were vilified by a Western audience who got too hung up on words like 'dating' and 'romance' to find the one word that actually mattered: 'relationships'. With the likes of Telltale and Naughty Dog telling stories about pretend people that we actually care about, though, a portion of the market is finally coming around to the idea that we can form emotional connections and bonds with characters, and all of a sudden that 'nonsense dating game lol' from a few years back doesn't seem quite so laughable. *999* and *Danganronpa* have both done their bit for the genre in the Western world, and the localisations keep coming. Here, Vita is largely a shelter for homeless indies, but that's just a reflection of the same trend with a different genre – in Japan, Vita is largely a platform for telling stories in a more involving manner than books or comics allow, while here it's basically a platform that affords creative freedom without having to break the bank, leading to an influx of smaller, more experimental games. Both are awesome. And as much as I'd rather be knocking down G-Rank critters on my 3DS, I both respect and appreciate those who like having the Vita tell them a story. Thanks, guys – you're helping to keep one of my favourite consoles alive.

> Western audiences got too hung up on words like 'dating' and 'romance' to find the one word that actually mattered: 'relationships'

Luke Albigés is Deputy Editor of **Play** magazine and therefore probably shouldn't admit his 3DS Monster Hunter addiction. It is bloody good, though…

IMPORT WATCH
MAKAI SENKI DISGAEA 5

● Still looking for that true next-gen experience? Unsurprisingly, you won't find it here – *Disgaea* has changed little in the jump from PS3 to PS4, and that's a good thing. Because what you *will* find is an amusing SRPG with a level of depth and wealth of content that puts most modern games to shame. It's still sprite-based, it's still packed with numbers way higher than you can count and it's still awesome. Also, prinnies.





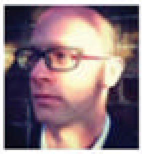
20th MARCH 2015
RIDE
PRE-ORDER NOW amazon.co.uk GAME
ridegame.co.uk
3
www.pegi.info
PROVISIONAL RATING
MILESTONE
XBOX ONE
XBOX 360
XBOX LIVE
PS4
PS3
PC DVD-ROM
Ride © 2015 Published and Developed by Milestone S.r.l. All rights reserved. All manufacturers, accessory suppliers, names, tracks, sponsors, brands and associated imagery featured in this game are trademarks and/or copyrighted materials of their respective owners. Trademarks, design patents and copyrights are used with the approval of the owner TRIUMPH DESIGNS LTD. The trade dress of YAMAHA Products are trademarks and intellectual property of YAMAHA Motor Co., Ltd. and used under license to Milestone Srl. all rights reserved -Yamaha Official Licensed Product-. Ducati Motor Holding S.p.A. official licensed product. "", "PlayStation", "PS3" and "" are registered trademarks of Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. Also "PS4" is trademark of the same company. All rights reserved.
WorldMags.net

ROOM WITH A VIEW

With The Chinese Room's Dan Pinchbeck



Cut That Scene



So I missed the memo, right? The one that said all was forgiven and that it's okay to ship games that are 50 per cent cutscene. That rather than trying to keep developing the brilliant work that's been done over the last couple of decades, we should just take the easy route and slap in a cutscene -or an interactive cutscene QTE because players are too dumb to know the difference, right? – every time we want to do anything that involves story. And then we can go ahead and crow about how we're making stuff with deep, rich narratives that push forwards the boundaries of storytelling in games, yadda, yadda, blah blah.

Garbage. Regular readers of this column will know I'm a grumpy old git, but that also means I've been around for long enough to have seen a bunch of stuff come and go, like Full Motion Video, which used to be the cutscene of choice. Worried that you can't pack more emotional, narrative sophistication into your game than you'd find stuck to the bottom of your shoe? No worries! Just grab a famous actor or two and film 'em like it's a movie, hell, just keep it as a movie and embed it into the game. Don't worry about integrating it into the action or anything, just set the story up between the actual game. This is usually called the string-of-pearls model, and it works, sure. But it's not actually embedding story into the gameplay, and it's twenty years old and we've moved beyond it once already. Which is why it's so disappointing to see it still being used as the basic model for most triple-A releases of the last year. We've been playing a lot recently, and Jessica Curry (the brains behind The Chinese Room for those who don't know) has been saying a lot of things like "Have you started playing yet?" and "Why are you putting the controller down again?" and "But if I wanted to watch a movie, I'd watch a movie", and so on.

> Worried that you can't pack more emotional sophistication into your game than you'd find stuck to the bottom of your shoe? Just grab a famous actor or two and film 'em like it's a movie

Here's the problem. Compared to most movies, most games still have the narrative and emotional sophistication of yoghurt. We're getting better for sure, but there are reasons why we can't do things movies can do, or at least, doing them is way harder in an interactive medium. But we can also do things movies can't and that's really important, and one of those things is giving a player a sense of agency within a story, and that's unique to games and phenomenally powerful. In that way, even guff like *Far Cry* (and anyone who knows me knows how much I love *Far Cry*, but we can't pretend it's anything other than guff) is actually more sophisticated in some ways than *Citizen Kane* (I can hear film theorists soil themselves in fury as I write this). But not in a straight film/cutscene comparison. Game cutscenes are generally far worse at doing movie stuff than even godawful hipster-bait like *Francis Ha*, which should have been a whipping offence for all involved. We can't compete on that level, and it's disappointing to see us try. It's a bit like trying to compete with novels but refusing to use words longer than two syllables.

There was a reason the cutscene went out of fashion. It was a tool to do a job from an age when other tools lacked the sophistication or capacity to do it for them. Then things changed, and the cutscenes started looking like a hangover – we had games like *Half-Life* that proved that with smart writing and design, potent narrative and emotional cues could be integrated into gameplay. We evolved. The current fashion of cutscenes is a throwback. I spend more time snarling "go and make a movie" at the screen than I do actually doing gameplay, and it's getting old. Again. Time to learn from the past, bin QTEs and cutscenes (interactive and non-interactive) for good, and focus on the uniqueness of the medium.



■ *Metal Gear*'s extended cutscenes have almost gone beyond the point of parody, with cuts of the games available on YouTube with these scenes alone.

Dan Pinchbeck is the creative director at The Chinese Room, currently working on Everybody's Gone To The Rapture. His views aren't necessarily representative of **games**™



WHY I ♥...
Grim Fandango

IAN MILHAM, CREATIVE DIRECTOR, VISCERAL GAMES

“*Back when games were two-dimensional, I was playing a lot of mid-Nineties JRPGs. They were fantastic, but it felt like they were in a pretty tight narrative box; that you were playing the same game over and over again. But then, in 1998,* Grim Fandango *came out. That game blew my mind. It was basically the same type of experience – you know, move your rudimentary 3D character around a 2D painting – but it combined all these influences into something fresh. A combination of Mexican Day of the Dead folklore with hotrods and film noir? I found it so inspirational and amazing that I immediately applied to LucasArts when I finished it. I needed to work with the people that made this game, so that's what I did! And I worked for Lucas Arts for the next five years after that.*”



“I found it so inspirational and amazing that I immediately applied to LucasArts when I finished it”

IAN MILHAM, CREATIVE DIRECTOR, VISCERAL GAMES

"For the main Final Fantasy games we must appeal to a very wide and mainstream audience, that's the biggest challenge of all"

HAJIME TABATA, SQUARE ENIX





Final Fantasy XV

CONCEPT ■ Latest entry in the 'core' *Final Fantasy* series and one that tells the story of a world's nations fighting over control of the last remaining 'crystal'

Pushing the formula beyond the limit break

Clearly, the powers overseeing *Final Fantasy XV* are not afraid of change. The project has changed title, director, release platform and overall scope. Most importantly it seems to be throwing out the *Final Fantasy* rulebook, developing an entirely new kind of experience. The wide-reaching alterations have resulted in a game that is shrouded in even more mystery and anticipation than even this most venerable of series usually enjoys. Failure to provide something truly special will likely trigger a serious bout of disappointment throughout a fanbase that views the franchise in incredibly high esteem.

It's not only those top-level aspects of *FFXV*'s development that are unafraid to embrace change, however. A number of core design choices demonstrates the abandonment of not only what *Final Fantasy* has adhered to in the past, but they disregard what the majority of Japanese-made RPGs have historically relied upon. Combat plays out in real time with you in control of one character for the duration of the game: Noctis. Damage is primarily dealt by pressing and holding the standard attack button in combinations of different timings and speeds. A few swift taps back to back might result in a flurry of light attacks, whereas a single press and hold causes Noctis to store his energy before charging in with a more powerful blow. Mastering and managing these different attacks is one key to victory, as is identifying which type of combo works best on which enemies.

Noctis has a number of weapons equipped at any one time, with the D-pad (on PlayStation 4) used to switch between them in battle. These come coupled with different stats for attack strength and speed, as well as a single special command that works as a magic attack of sorts. This 'magic' ranges from the kind that deals significant damage, shock wave-causing leaps from the sky or long-range lunges, for instance, to those that undermine your enemy in more subtle ways; perhaps by draining their hit and/or magic points over time.

As a means of balancing these special battle actions, Noctis' MP gauge depletes each time you use them. Should it empty completely you enter a state of 'stasis' that sees movement speed and attack damage greatly reduced. Your best bet here is to avoid conflict for a while and wait for your MP to gradually trickle back up again, which it does slowly over time.

/// The speed of combat, in combination with the number of enemies and allies on the screen at any one time, adds an unpredictable aura that initially feels unwieldy and unnatural within a *Final Fantasy* context. When you consider that Noctis can also dodge and jump, the visuals and your inputs often resemble that of a third-person action game more than they do a JRPG.

For those wishing to play a more clandestine and cerebral game, a stealth stance can be activated at the press of a button. This causes Noctis to move slower, but it also allows him to parry attacks just as an enemy is about to deal damage. In this stance, a button prompt appears on the screen for a split second as you're being attacked and, if you manage to press the correct input quickly enough, you can launch a killer blow upon weaker enemies. Tougher enemies are able to stand up to such tactics, although you will deal considerably more damage than usual.

While you're dodging, parrying and regaining your MP, your companions are acting on their own accord by dealing damage and hopping about the environment. Ignis is a suave Brit with locks of bright blonde hair, Gladiolus is the brutish warrior type and Prompto is the long-range gunslinger. There's no getting over the sensation that not having control over the entire group is an awkward concept to immediately warm to, but after you've experienced how frenetic combat can be you begin to understand the design choice.

There is a level of essential interaction between the group that must be adhered to, however, not least when it comes to keeping everyone healthy and in fighting shape. While

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One, PS4
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: In-house
Release: TBC
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Game director Hajime Tabata is now in sole charge of overseeing *Final Fantasy XV* following the departure of co-director Tetsuya Nomura who is now working on *Kingdom Hearts III*. Tabata made his name creating handheld games, most notably in the form of *Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII* and *The 3rd Birthday.*

Developer History

Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII **2008 [PSP]**
Kingdoms Hearts: Coded **2008 [NDS]**
The 3rd Birthday **2010 [PSP]**
Final Fantasy Type-0 **2011 [PSP]**

High Point

One of the finest games to grace the PSP, *Crisis Core* blends *Final Fantasy*'s traditional RPG elements with a combat system that is action-packed yet graceful.

you can apply potions to yourself, it makes sense for you to keep slashing away while someone else coats you in the health-reviving dust – preventing you from having to delve into menu screens that feel unwelcome amidst the ferocity of action. By the same token, responsibility sometimes falls on you to keep track of your allies' health and send potions their way when necessary.

Beyond the battle arena things are equally diverse and complex. The enormous expanse of the Duscae region (the only one we've played thus far) takes full advantage of the processing power of the latest consoles to create a scene that wouldn't feel out of place in *Jurassic Park*. Green hills and valleys rise and dip far into the distance, giant reptilian beasts sip water from shimmering lakes and rocky cliffs hide narrow caves before flicking dramatically into clusters of evergreens.

Within this environment you're free to act and move however you wish, there are no set routes forcing you down a narrow path and attempting to dictate the pace of play. Our wider mission here is to raise enough money to fix our ailing vehicle, but how you go about that is up to you. Most obviously, you can hunt a monster that has had a bounty put on its head; conveniently, the bounty value is the precise amount required to fix the vehicle. Alternatively, you can ignore that altogether and simply see which side-quests and activities pop up as you explore.

> "Something like 30-40% of the content is designed to please those existing fans, but the remaining content is about taking things in new directions"
>
> **HAJIME TABATA, SQUARE ENIX**

/// Everything from chocobo ranches to random encounters against an ill-tempered military to collecting valuables adds to the tapestry of exploration, many of these leading to money in the form of the series' traditional 'Gil' currency. The degree of choice placed on your shoulders stands in stark contrast to the often stifling linearity of *Final Fantasy XIII*, often to the point where you can't help but think the approach here has been crafted as a direct counterpoint to criticism levelled at this game. Hopefully the reaction doesn't push the structure of the game so far into the open-world realm that *FFXV* loses that sense of well-defined narrative that has become the series most enduring legacy for many of us.

It's not only 'what' you decide to do that matters, either, it's also 'when'. In the grandest traditions of the likes of *Grand Theft Auto* and *Skyrim*, a full day/night cycle causes light to turn to dark and new enemies come out to play. Night hours sees the world populated by the kinds of beasts that you're more likely to find hiding in caves and dungeons during the day, a problem that becomes worse when you take into account that navigating solely by torchlight makes it more difficult to avoid potentially dangerous skirmishes.

Finding and resting at camps causes the clock to speed up and your party to awaken at dawn, giving themselves plenty of daylight to operate under. Meals are consumed when at camp, providing you with temporary stat boasts depending on the constituents of your dinner. These ingredients can be sourced from hunting the local wildlife, thus encouraging you to engage in battle rather than simply avoid it.

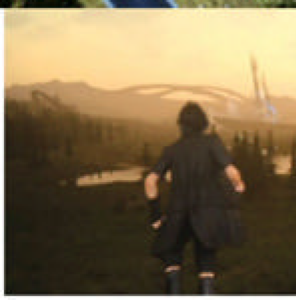
Camps are also the only place in which you can level up your party, with all the experience points acquired during the day being banked around the fire and, possibly, resulting in your team waking up with new skills learned and better stats applied. It's presently unclear to what extent you can customise your party's levelling-up path, but we do know that new gear, items and weapons can be equipped in whatever combination you desire (so long as you've hit the appropriate character level/s).

The caveat to everything mentioned here, of course, is that much of what we've seen might once again change before release; not least because no launch date has been announced, making it impossible to know just how much development time remains. Whatever the case, as an indicator for the aims and ambitions of the project, time spent wandering around Duscae makes for an enlightening experience. Most striking is the willingness to abandon many of those elements that we've come to take for granted from *Final Fantasy*, replaced by design directions that would feel more at home within the confines of a Western-made RPG or action game.

Whether or not that sounds like a positive or negative will wholly depend on your currently held viewpoint of *Final Fantasy* as an enterprise. If you're a staunch supporter that wants to see a return to the systems of *Final Fantasy VI* and *VII* then you're likely going to feel let down by what's on offer. However, if you're craving a modern twist on the *Final Fantasy* formula then you've every reason to get excited.







Top: If you've access to a vehicle, you can use these roads to travel quickly between regions, presumably avoiding combat as you do. Above: Battles against multiple enemies can be difficult to manage given just how fast combat plays out. Right: The day/night cycle can create impressive conditions that cloak the environment with a different personality.



Above: Post-battle stats detail the amount of experience you've earned and damage taken, giving you incentive to improve your performance.







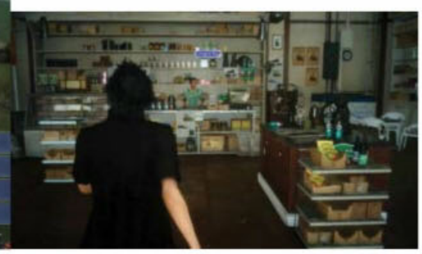
WELCOME TO THE RETRO FUTURE

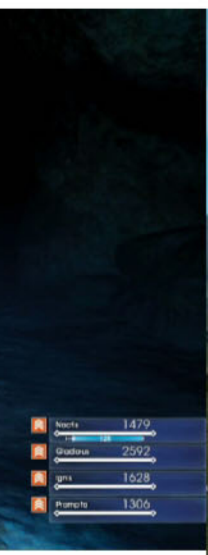
FINAL FANTASY XV'S visual signature is a mix of past and future, the two elements juxtaposing one another to create an atmosphere that is at once familiar and unusual. Sci-fi-style magic attacks, potions and architecture blends with cars and trucks that are distinctly old-fashioned in both shape and colour. In truth, it's not a far cry away from the kind of visual language employed by some of the earlier *Final Fantasy* games; particularly those that have embraced something akin to a steampunk aesthetic. Of course, what's on show here benefits from the higher technical threshold made possible thanks to the far greater performance of the hardware being utilised.





■ Above: Some larger enemies have multiple areas of their body that can be damaged. Targeting a certain body part can result in a reduction of their speed and/or attack power, giving you more tactical options when it comes to tougher fights. Below: Shops continue to act as your primary means of acquiring the exact kinds of items you're looking for. Defeated monsters drop items, of course, but there's little way of predicting what you're going to get.

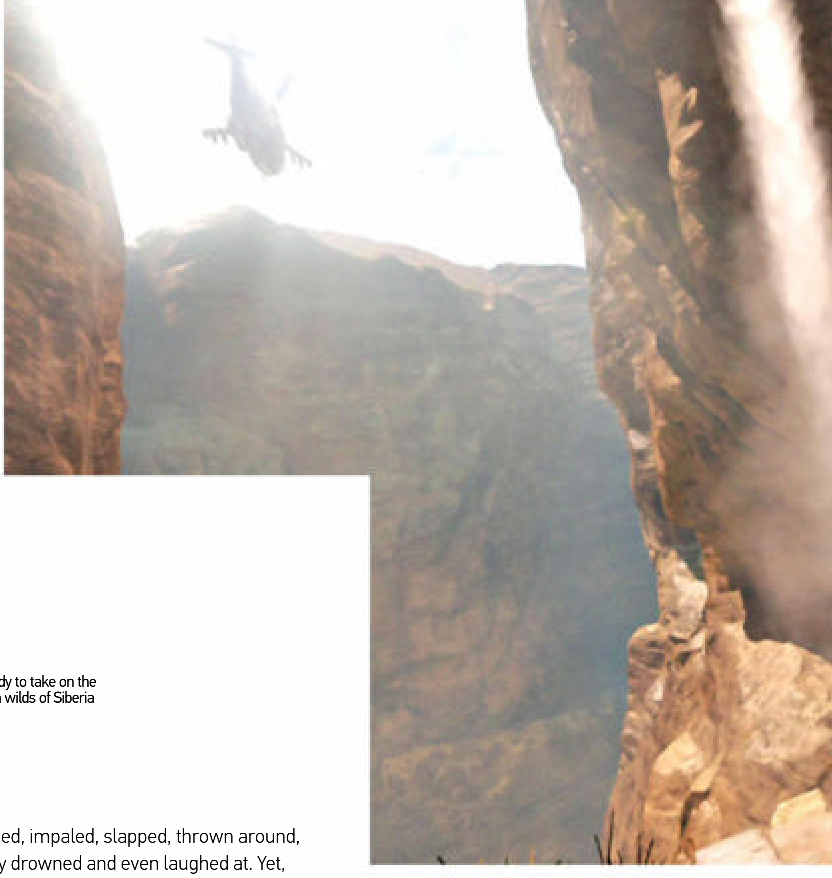






RANDOM EVENTS

AS YOU travel across the world there's every chance that you're going to experience events that others won't. Magitek troops, for example, hover over the world in patrol patterns that are unpredictable – preventing you from being able to label certain areas of the map as more dangerous than others. If you're lucky the patrol ships might simply fly overhead, but if you're unlucky the troops might decide to unload and scout the vicinity you're travelling through. Should this happen then you've got a decision to make; either stand and fight or attempt to tiptoe around them undetected. Avoiding trouble might be the easy option, but at some point you've got to earn experience points to prevent later challenges becoming overly difficult.



Rise Of The Tomb Raider

CONCEPT Lara is back from her adventures in Yamatai and ready to take on the wilderness on the other side of the world – in the frozen wilds of Siberia

Siberian Nights

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox 360, Xbox One
Origin: USA
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: Crystal Dynamics
Release: Q4 2015
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Established in 1992 by a group of Sega veterans, Crystal Dynamics got off to a good start in life by appointing 20th Century Fox's ex-president as its head, whipping up a media storm and attracting investors left, right and centre. Since then, the studio proved its worth by developing the *Legacy Of Kain* and *Gex* properties.

Developer History

Tomb Raider **2013 [Multi]**
Legacy Of Kain: Soul Reaver **1999 [PSOne, PC, Dreamcast]**
Pandemonium **1996 [PSOne, Sega Saturn]**
Gex **1994 [3DO, Sega Saturn, PSOne]**

High Point

Legacy of Kain: Soul Reaver remains a high point of the series – fusing the uniquely dilapidated, gothic world design with Amy Hennig's wonderful storytelling.

What would you do if you were forced to kill someone? What would you do if you were forced into a corner, like an animal – threatened, with nowhere to run, no way of escaping? Someone has defiled you, taken away your right of flight, left you only with the *need* to fight. You'd kill them, right? It's them or you; it's logical, it makes sense – and that's before all that cortisone and adrenaline kicks in and turns you feral.

Poor Lara was little more than a ball of nerves running around, laced with every survival chemical her body could muster, back in 2013. The reboot seemed orchestrated by some sadistic god that wanted to use Lara as little more than a puppet in a sick game of cat and mouse. Like Bear Grylls cast in one of those uninspiring *Saw* films. And we're not just talking about the narrative disconnection here – those death scenes you've seen play out time and time again, no: we're talking about the *actual story*.

> "In the next chapter of her journey, Lara must use her survival skills and wits, learn to trust new friends, and ultimately accept her destiny as the Tomb Raider"
> PRESS RELEASE SQUARE ENIX

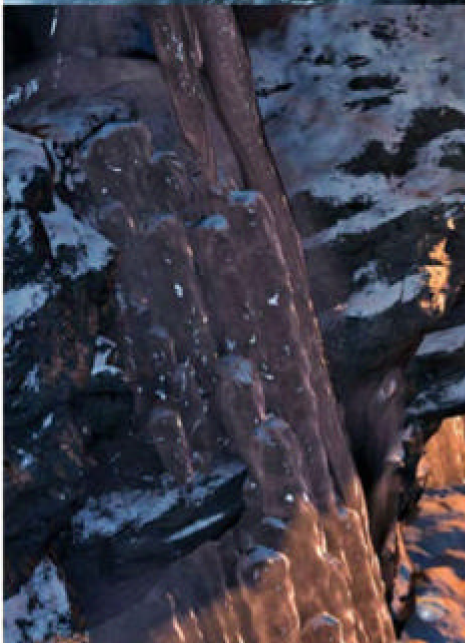
Rhianna Pratchett's merciless arc saw Lara step out into the real world after graduating with an archaeological studies degree from a prestigious university (we're going to assume Oxford, because of the affected accent Lara sports throughout the game). Right off the bat, we're taught that Lara isn't going to have the simple expedition she thought she would – the ironically named Endurance ship ruptures and spews its crew onto the coast of Yamatai: an island in the Dragon's Triangle area off the coast of Japan, subject to abnormally ferocious weather that batters at its inhabitants. From there, Lara gets captured, bitten, mauled, shot at, stabbed, impaled, slapped, thrown around, nearly drowned and even laughed at. Yet, unlike the ship, she endures.

And she's back for more. The once wide-eyed girl from somewhere in middle England is dead, and she's been replaced with a practiced killer. Someone that, in the course of the previous game's action, probably killed more humans than she could legally justify in any court of law (good job Yamatai probably finds itself in international waters). This time, Lara's got her sights set on Siberia – on a grand stone city built by the Grand Duke of Vladimir in the 13th century, no less. Hey – the intrepid spelunker's archaeological hunches paid off the first time, right? *Surely*, they'd pay off again…

Lara's used to running into trouble on these expeditions, now, though. So this time, she comes a bit more prepared. For a start, in all the gameplay we've seen, she's no longer held together by tattered bits of burlap and canvas – her considerable wealth back home has kitted her out in the finest wintry exploration gear money could buy: a nice red waffle coat and a pair of gleaming red ice picks. Perfect for taking out Russian spies.

/// She also knows that she's not the only glory-hungry treasure hunter out there, and has employed the assistance of Jonah Maiava – who seems to have come a long way since his humble origins as a fisherman in the last







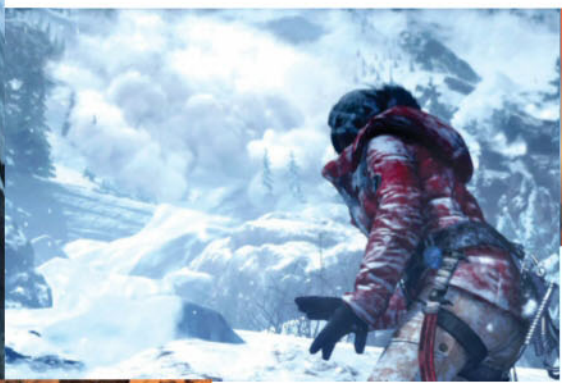
■ Below: Has the crew been largely downsized since Lara set out on the Endurance, or are we going to be introduced to other characters aside from the returning Jonah Maiava?





WHOLE LARA LOVE

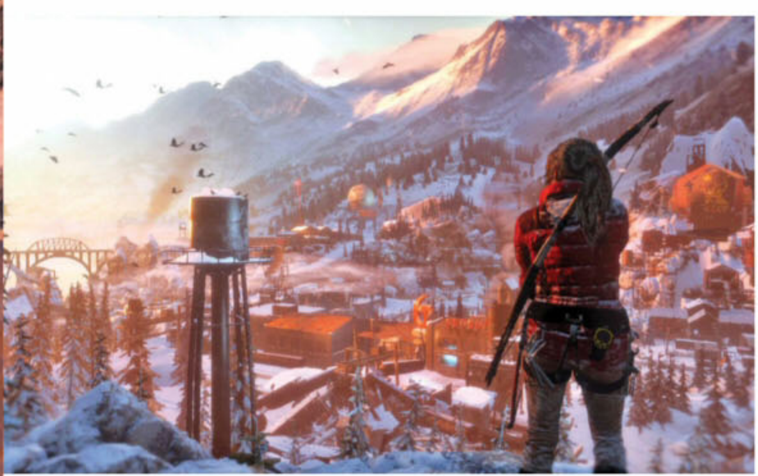
WHEN YOU'VE GOT a singular named protagonist like Lara Croft, one of the most difficult things to do is make her fully believable – fully human and understandable. To that end, Crystal Dynamics is using the same Crystal Engine that powered the last game to motion capture Lara's movements and voice actress Camilla Luddington is reprising her role. We're expecting the same kind of clothing damage and cosmetic affects to be applied as you play through the game, too.





■ Below: Crystal Dynamics has promised that it won't just be claustrophobic caves and crumbling cliff-faces that you'll be navigating; there'll be industrial sections with cranes and mechanical elements too.





game. Maybe it was his brush in with the esoteric and paranormal in the 2013 reboot that primed him for this new trip with Lara – he was always a romantic at heart, after all, and his encounters on Yamatai seemed to bring him closer to Lara than, you know, a *non*-supernatural adventure would. Hopefully the rest of the cast will be a bit more human and a little less 'misfit crew' stereotype than last time, though.

/// No adventure is complete without an antagonistic force. Whilst the first game had Lara contend with the samurai-like Oni demons and the vicious advances of the Solarii brotherhood, this game seems like it will branch the opposing forces off into two directions: 'Trinity' and whatever ancient evils lie dormant in the Lost City of Kitezh. According to real-life myths, we can safely assume the enemies Lara will encounter will be of Mongolian descent – potentially drowned souls or something similar, since the myth states the 'invisible city' was sunk deep into Lake Svetloyar along with the maiden Fevroniya.

This leads us to Lara's motivations for heading out to Kitezh in the first place – according to a 1907 opera written by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Kitezh was the resting place for a the royal couple that reigned over the doomed city. Apparently, the aforementioned maiden Fevroniya had healing powers she could use to soothe the scabs her husband Peter suffered when he slayed a snake that harassed the princess of the kingdom. The two, bound to die together (when the maiden can no longer heal Peter) live out their days in the monasteries of Kitezh, and are buried in separate graves. However, whenever people check in on their respective tombs, they find the bodies always together, like the couple was bound by fate…

So why is Lara travelling there, to this semi-mystical invisible city? We've already seen her sat in a therapist's room, recounting the events of Yamatai and showing emotional distress; could it be she's after the healing powers of the invisible Russian city to calm her mind, heal her broken psyche? Or is she just addicted to the thrill of adventure now, having been brought so violently into the world of exploration a couple of years ago?

/// It remains to be seen, but regardless, we meet Lara in the tundras of Siberia, and it seems like she's in trouble. The gods dictating her world (read: Rihanna Pratchett) clearly haven't let up on our poor protagonist since last time – we see Lara tumble down a sheer cliff-face and *barely* manage to save herself, before ambling aimlessly into the lair of a massive Russian bear. From this, we can assume the QTE-lite sections are back – hit button prompts at the right time, or watch Lara suffer another one of those gruesome Game Over animations.

It also means the survivalism elements of the first game make a return – whether the same campfire hub mechanic returns too remains to be seen, but it makes sense: after all, if you're caught in the tundra, you're going to need all the warmth you can get. It also makes us wonder whether Crystal

SOME SIBERIAN FILMS

WHEN DEVELOPERS START working on a game, they tend to create virtual mood boards – handy tools for illuminating the tone, feel and direction of the games they're making to potential shareholders, publishers or other members of development staff. These mood boards are called rippomatics. And the rippomatic for *Rise Of The Tomb Raider* has some expected titles, and some rather unexpected ones…

RAMBO: FIRST BLOOD PART II: We reckon this is included for the way Sylvester Stallone tackles his enemies – the slinking through the undergrowth.

TERMINATOR 2: JUDGEMENT DAY: We can only assume the similarities here come from Sarah Connor's character… does that mean we're going to see a more ruthless Lara?

THE EDGE: A pure 'surviving in the wilderness' romp, this 1997 classic even has a battle with a bear in it.

HANNA: A young Finnish girl learns to survive in the harsh wilderness of her native country, and she mostly does it with a bow. Sound familiar?

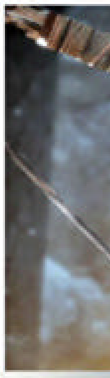
THE GREY: A plane crashes in Alaska and the surviving crew need to learn to adapt to the wild and fight off a pack of wolves. Wolves in *Rise Of The Tomb Raider* are confirmed.



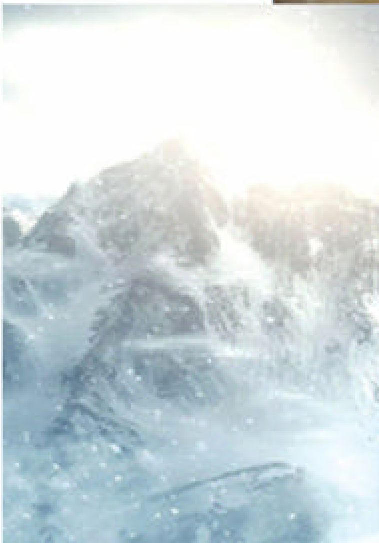
"Featuring epic, high-octane action moments, Rise Of The Tomb Raider will take gamers to multiple locations around the world filled with exploration spaces"

PRESS RELEASE SQUARE ENIX





Above: Are we going to have to kill this bear, or run from it? Can we skin it, can we wear its skin? Can we distract it by leaving fish somewhere and sneak around it? There are so many questions about Lara's newly revamped survival aptitude.
Right: That look of utter despair on Lara's face means something terrible has happened off-camera. Has Jonah been mauled by a bear? Has she caused the collapse of a 1000 year old monastery? Did she rip her parka?









Dynamics is going to flesh out that mechanic a little bit more – say, for example, there's a blizzard covering the entrance to a cave you need to explore. Does that mean you need to kill that bear that's in the way first, skin its fur to wear as extra warmth before braving the snowstorm? We'd like to think so – after all, the 2013 reboot was more of a survival sim than any other *Tomb Raider* game before it, and it's a trend we'd like to see continue through the series. Also, with *Uncharted 4* hitting the PS4 later this year *Tomb Raider* is going to want to do something a little different to the Indiana Jones simulator that's likely going to bulldoze the games press. *Tomb Raider* will actually benefit from going a bit more niche.

/// Of course, a game can't carry the respectable *Tomb Raider* name without architecturally-based puzzles, right? So what can we expect from Lara's newest adventure? According to Crystal Dynamics, Kitezh will feature more of a focus on puzzling than Yamatai did – what's the point of making an invisible city if people can easily get around it? – and these puzzles will operate across a 'spectrum of difficulty' according to creative director Noah Hughes. The new puzzles will bring back the old *Tomb Raider* design trope the developers like to call 'nested puzzles' – modular-based physics puzzles with a focus on cause and effect, meaning you have to work through puzzles one bit at a time, seeing what effects what and how you can use those changes to your advantage.

If that sounds a bit too much, don't worry; these tombs will most likely be optional, as they were in the 2013 game. But they're worth diving into – Crystal Dynamics has hinted that these tricksy tombs will contain better loot and treasure, making it more worth your time to explore and investigate your surroundings. The development team stated it had listened to feedback from fans regarding the difficulty of the first game – many said it was too easy – and was keen to challenge gamers more with Lara's second revamped adventure.

Crystal Dynamics has clearly taken on-board the lessons learned from Lara's baptism of fire, and is keen on throwing her right back into the fire with its first sequel. The studio knows Lara, and knows her very well – the 2013 game proves that – but her narrative arc was sometimes lacking in places, her actions versus her motivations contradictory and vague. Now, Crystal Dynamics has a chance to really make something of Lara – to redefine her as the female action hero the games industry is crying out for, to prove that the likes of Naughty Dog's Nathan Drake and Ubisoft's Persian Prince don't have a monopoly on the adventure genre.



Rise Of Incarnates

CONCEPT A two-on-two 3D arena fighting game, in which superhuman combatants attempt to best each other with a mixture of projectile attacks and physical combos.

A new incarnation of an old formula as arena battling looks to the world of MOBAs

Left: Awakened forms are powerful, and their ideal deployment will be the subject of some debate. Is it better to save them to rescue a partner in peril, or use them in order to finish off opponents?





INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Bandai Namco Games
Developer: In-house
Release: 2015
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

Bandai Namco Games has a strong history in the fighting genre, and has assembled a heavyweight team of producers for *Rise Of Incarnates*. Daisuke Murano is best known for his work on the *SoulCalibur* series, Michael Murray for *Tekken* and Ryuichiro Baba for *Gundam Vs*, on which this game is based.

Developer History

Soul Calibur IV
2008 [Xbox 360, PS3]
Mobile Suit Gundam: Extreme Vs
2010 [Arcade, PS3]
Tekken Tag Tournament 2
2011 [Arcade, Xbox 360, PS3, Wii U]
SoulCalibur V
2012 [Xbox 360, PS3]

High Point

Tekken's second foray into tag-team action with *Tekken Tag Tournament 2* was Bandai Namco's best effort in the genre in years, revitalising the series as its competitors began to stagnate.

It's been a long time since we've seen anything like *Rise Of Incarnates.* Adapted from the gameplay found in the Japanese game *Mobile Suit Gundam: Extreme Vs*, *Rise Of Incarnates* pits teams of Incarnates against each other in open 3D arenas, with both ranged weaponry and physical attacks at their disposal. Ranged weapons require time to recharge and physical attacks have limited range, so much of your success will depend on minimising dead time.

Rise Of Incarnates manages to include a number of interesting additions to the formula, many of which come from the team-based battles. While the special double-team attack is expected, as is the general chaos which arises from adding participants, the game's approach to character balance is interesting. Players share a life bar, which depletes when characters respawn. More powerful fighters consume a lot of life, while weaker ones can respawn more often. The differences are tangible, and this extends to the fighters – each plays very differently, with remarkable differences in agility, strength and strategic application. Players will need to consider character pairings carefully in order to maximise their chances of winning.

Like the comics that inspired it, *Rise Of Incarnates* takes place in real world locations, such as London here.

The game seems to hold a great deal of potential to hook players in for the long term. For the players raised on the technicality of similar games such as *Virtual On*, there's ample room to explore mechanics, such as dash cancels, custom combos and each fighter's powerful awakened state, a temporary power boost that transforms the fighter and opens up new attacks. For those who enjoy pre-battle strategy, a system of ability upgrades allows you to tinker with attributes, such as melee strength and post-respawn health in order to build the best version of your Incarnate.

While *Rise Of Incarnates* displays plenty of potential, some of it may be lost if the game's battle arenas aren't made a little more interesting – at present, they are visually appealing but offer few cover opportunities or other distinguishing features. Additionally, the free-to-play model may need refining. Currency earned during gameplay could only be used to purchase upgrades during our test, with all other purchases requiring real cash, including additional characters – an approach that may put off players who come to enjoy multiple characters. *Rise Of Incarnates* will undoubtedly provide some valuable diversity within the free-to-play market, but if these issues can be addressed, it should snap the attention of a much wider audience.



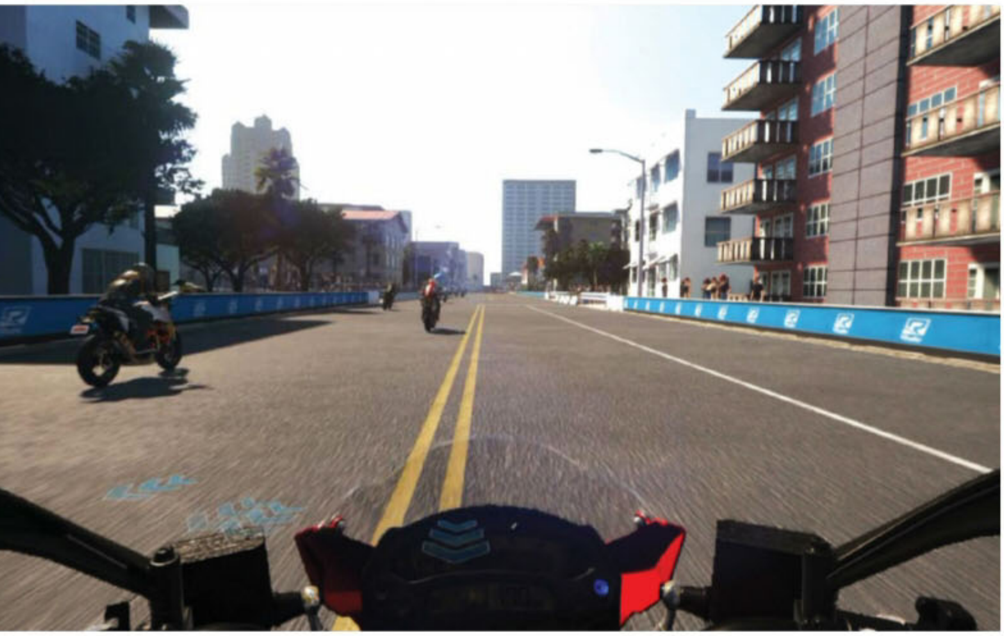
"Rise of Incarnates is a mixed discipline game where shooters, fighters, MOBA game users can all bring their skills"
DAISUKE MURANO BANDAI NAMCO GAMES

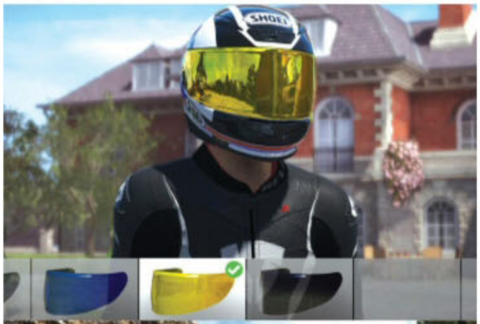


WILD HOGS

HOW AUTHENTIC ARE *RIDE*'s motorcycles? Given Milestone was given the actual CAD data to incorporate into the game, about as close as it can be. "We got a lot of the 3D models manufacturers use to build the bikes in reality," Basilio tells us. "We start from that, then we have all the data for the engines and measurements for the bikes. That's really good because our game engine can use that data to simulate the engine in the right way. We also bring the physical bikes in and get the engine roar right. Every bike sounds different because they have the proper engine," he adds. There you go – the closest you'll get to the real thing without wearing a leather jumpsuit.

Above: The level of precision *RIDE* aims to offer in its customisation is laudable, but the fact that none of this was actually playable has us somewhat concerned. If these factors do noticeably impact play though, all the better.







Above: Horizontal street bikes are apparently a big deal in *RIDE* according to the developer. They're going to take the MotoGP by storm next season too.

INFORMATION

Details

Format:
PS4, PS3, Xbox One, Xbox 360, PC
Origin:
Italy
Publisher:
Milestone
Developer:
In-house
Release:
Q2 2015
Players:
1-2 offline, 8 online multiplayer

Developer Profile

Founded in 1994 as Graffiti, the rapidly re-named Milestone is a studio committed to automotive acceleration. The Italian company has produced almost three dozen racers, and with the *MotoGP* and *Superbike* franchises, it's almost singularly kept bike racers in the public eye – a great starting position for its first original racing IP.

Developer History

Screamer 2
1996 [PC]
SBK Generations
2012 [Multi]
WRC 4
2013 [Multi]
MotoGP 14
2014 [Multi]

High Point

No single standout, but as long-time licence holder for both *MotoGP* and *Superbike World Championship*, Milestone has proven itself as a developer of bike racers, which bodes well for *RIDE*.

RIDE

CONCEPT ■ *RIDE* exists for one bold, ambitious reason: to be the *Gran Turismo* of bike games, with all the simulation and customisation aspects that entails

This is no Easy Rider

When a rival overtakes you as you're zooming along atop a precision piece of two-wheeled engineering genius, it's hard not to think of *Road Rash.* As tempting as it would be to lash out with a well-placed length of chain, *RIDE* isn't that kind of bike racer – it has loftier ambitions. It wants to do for motorbikes what *Gran Turismo* did for cars and, in pure racing terms, it's on track.

The game is the first original IP for developer Milestone since 2007 (remember *Super PickUps* for the Wii? No, thought not) and one born of the team's desire to step out on their own. "We had great fun working on licensed games, but we wanted to move to something with more creative freedom and challenge," game designer Andrea Basilio tells **games™**. "It's important for us to create a game that is enjoyable for the sort of player that knows everything about bikes, how the physics work, but also give an enjoyable game for players that like bikes but aren't hardcore into them."

It's certainly accessible for newcomers. Basic racing experience will see you through *RIDE* at its easiest – press button, go fast, turn to not leave track. It even has an auto-braking option to help navigate those tricky corner things, and a racing line that's pleasingly simple to follow. Newcomers are definitely well treated, the game slowly educating as to its nuances as players progress. At the hardcore end of the spectrum though, you'll need to consider the weight and position of the rider and the impact that has on the physics of a motorbike roaring along at insane speeds.

Many of the demands of high-level play are communicated visually. You'll see the rider react to the forces impacting them, requiring subtle changes to your race style to compensate. You're also meant to be able to feel changes in track conditions relayed through the controller's vibration. At least, that's the idea – while playing, we didn't experience any shifts in weather or anything else that might alter the track that changed the physical feedback.

/// It's nice to see the resurgence of split-screen local multiplayer across the gaming medium continue, with *RIDE* offering the feature in its offline modes. It packs in all the expected race types – quick races, time trials, drag races, track days, one-on-one battles, and endurance tests – accompanying a lengthy World Tour career for solo players. Online, you can look forward to single races or multi-track seasons, for up to 12 players.

> "We wanted to develop something that would bring together all our expertise with respect to motorcycling"
>
> MARCO MICALLEF MILESTONE

Aesthetically, *RIDE* is phenomenal. Locations and tracks – 15 in total, including Magny-Cours in France, Motegi in Japan, Sierra Nevada in the US, and Milestone's native Milano – are all topologically mapped for accuracy, and the lighting and texturing border on the photorealistic. The bikes themselves offer plenty of variety, with a total of 14 manufacturers included in the game and over 114 playable motorcycles. The only absences are Harley Davidson and Norton, whose bikes are "not quite right for this version of *RIDE*", according to Basilio.

However, for a game wanting to be "*Gran Turismo* for bikes", it's slightly worrying that a component key to the success of Sony's racing smash – customisation, and lots of it – wasn't playable in a preview build mere weeks before *RIDE*'s release. The developer promises great things though, with Basilio saying "we have twenty components on each bike you can customise. Some are aesthetic, some are performance, others are both." The aim is to "customise everything", using real after-market parts for the bikes and with over 100 accessories included for the racer. Exactly how this is implemented is impossible to predict as of yet, though.

As a racing game, *RIDE* has its core attraction locked down. It's a fantastic motorbike racer, potentially a contender for best ever thanks to its intuitive controls and phenomenal selection of hogs and tracks. However, if the customisation suite proves even slightly lacking, it'll fall far short of its four-wheeled inspiration.





■ Above: *RIDE*'s locations really are superb. It's a shame you can't forget that racing nonsense and just motor about the countryside.





Below: Some attacks are standard 'point and aim' affairs, but other weapons, such as John Henry's bear grenade, instead have a firing arc to take into account. While trickier to hit with, they're useful because they can be fired over scenery.



Code Name: STEAM

CONCEPT ■ Intelligent Systems' new IP is a steampunk themed turn-based strategy game with third-person shooter elements and a comic book art style

Steampunk is interesting when Nintendo does it

Clearly not content with working on the upcoming successor to the critically acclaimed *Fire Emblem Awakening*, as well as a crossover with *Shin Megami Tensei* studio Atlus, Intelligent Systems is also turning its hand to a brand new IP that adds a third-person viewpoint to the studio's trademark turn-based strategy.

Code Name: STEAM is set in a steampunk version of London, one under attack by invading Lovecraftian aliens. Players take control of Henry Fleming, a member of the Unit STEAM combat force, as he tries to end the alien menace while encountering and teaming up with like-minded soldiers on the way.

Fans of the *Valkyria Chronicles* games will be immediately familiar with *Code Name: STEAM*'s central mechanics. The game essentially takes the grid-based gameplay Intelligent Systems used in *Advance Wars* and *Fire Emblem* and moves it to a third-person perspective, meaning attacking your enemy becomes as much about aiming precision as it is simply moving your unit within range.

What makes things interesting is the lack of a top-down map view, meaning the only way you can plan ahead is by actively moving your units forward and exploring the literally uncharted territory around you. In true turn-based fashion, movement is limited per turn, with each unit powered by a steam gauge that depletes as they move forward, fire weapons or perform a physical action. While moving ahead will decrease your steam, returning to your starting point replenishes it: this gives a little scope for exploration and prevents you walking blindly into an enemyfest with no means of going "whoops" and quickly leaving.

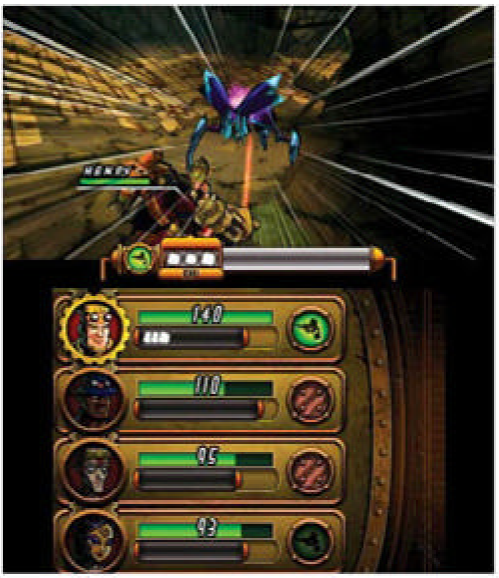
Units can also end their turn with some steam left, allowing them to perform 'overwatch' attacks. Also seen in the *XCOM* games, these give your unit the ability to fire their weapons during an enemy's turn if it comes within range. They can do the same during your turn, however, meaning running up to an alien head-on frequently results in them getting the first attack in. The game's general feel, then, is that of a more patient version of *Gears Of War*, in which each extraterrestrial enemy has to be stealthily approached from out of sight and taken out before it has the chance to spot you.

> "To defeat aliens, they have to take cover, set up ambushes and unleash crossfires and counter-attacks"
>
> PRESS RELEASE, INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS

COINING IT IN

CODE NAME: STEAM differs from similar games of its ilk – such as *XCOM* and *Valkyria Chronicles* – with the inclusion of medals. These are collected when enemies are defeated and can also be found lying around maps. Medals can be saved up and spent to promote characters faster, which in turn leads to new sub-weapons. For the most part they will be used during battles at one of the save points on each map. A quick save is free but players can also spend extra medals while saving to either restore their own health, or restore everyone on the squad's health (and reviving fallen allies). It's a system that helps inexperienced players and rewards skilful ones who can resist spending mid-fight.





Above: Here's the *Fire Emblem* squad – Marth, Ike, Lucina and Robin – in all their glory. They can only be unlocked with their respective amiibo figures, though Nintendo says cheaper NFC amiibo cards serving the same purpose are planned.

INFORMATION

Details

Format:
3DS
Origin:
Japan
Publisher:
Nintendo
Developer:
Intelligent Systems
Release:
15 May
Players:
1

Developer Profile

Intelligent Systems has long been Nintendo's turn-based strategy studio, and is best known for the publisher's two best-loved strategy series, *Fire Emblem* and *Advance Wars*. It's also known for more light-hearted affairs, particularly the quirky *WarioWare* games. It's currently working with Atlus on crossover title *Shin Megami Tensei X Fire Emblem*.

Developer History

WarioWare, Inc: Mega Microgames
2003 [GBA]

Paper Mario: The Thousand Year Door
2004 [GameCube]

Advance Wars: Dual Strike
2005 [DS]

Fire Emblem Awakening
2012 [3DS]

High Point

The incredible *Fire Emblem Awakening* on 3DS ensured the go-ahead for the upcoming fourteenth game, *Fire Emblem If*.

This all takes place within a curious aesthetic that certainly doesn't feel like it comes from a Nintendo studio. That steampunk has been overused over the years is something of an understatement, and it's odd to see a first-party 3DS game dishing out thick helpings of the greys and browns non-Nintendo systems are often criticised for placing too much emphasis on. Its comic book style dialogue panels and Lovecraftian enemy designs are more pleasing to the eye though, and give the game some much-needed character.

Given that Nintendo's amiibo figures are all the rage at the moment, it's no surprise that *Code Name: STEAM* is the latest game to confirm support for its NFC characters. Mario, Link and other common characters will have to sit on the sidelines this time though, with Intelligent Systems instead choosing only to make the game compatible with the four *Fire Emblem* amiibo. As a result, anyone owning the Marth, Ike, Lucina or Robin figures will be able to scan them (only on the New 3DS for now) and unlock them as playable squad members in the game. Given that swords and magic rather than gunplay are the order of the day in *Fire Emblem*, adding these characters to the mix should put an interesting spin on things.

With its steampunk setting *Code Name: STEAM* may not have the most original premise, but the proof is in the playing and so far we've been impressed. The lack of a map means there are often moments during enemy phases where you're just standing there – often behind cover – staring at a wall while aliens you can't see move around, but these awkward moments aside, Intelligent Systems may very well be onto another turn-based winner.





Above: Since Marth's more of a close quarters fighter, he has to run right up to enemies before he can engage them in battle.



"There's no backtracking, reloading, same guards in the same place, no slightly different approach; you deal with it"
DAN MARSHALL SIZE FIVE GAMES



■ The arm of the law is long indeed. Robotic cops aren't vulnerable to knock outs, though with certain gadgets it's possible to evade them and escape.

The Swindle

CONCEPT ■ Stealth action thieving with an emphasis on pulling off perfect heists on procedurally-generated levels, where steampunk security robots try to stop you

Spelunky meets Dishonored for a spot of burglary

***The Swindle* bridges a colossal gap in modern game design.** We're talking about the gap between roguelike gameplay and… well, everything else. You either get as many tries as you like or you embrace the finality of permadeath scenarios and start over again. *The Swindle* is prepared to meet us halfway – and not just where videogame death is concerned.

You're tasked with infiltrating a grubby, steam-powered Victorian London. Scotland Yard has built itself a rudimentary AI, which they plan to plug into London's security network in 100 days, thus making any kind of burglary or crime difficult. As a master thief, you're keen to prevent that from happening.

Those 100 days represent 100 chances for your band of sneaks to enter as many buildings as possible, steal as much cash as possible, and get some kind of plan in order for the biggest heist of all at Scotland Yard. Complete a level, that's a day gone. Die or get caught, that's also a day gone.

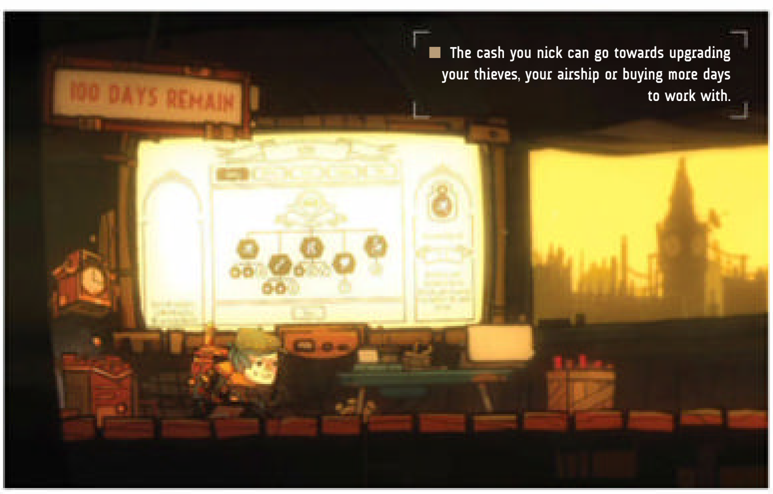
What's clever about *The Swindle* is how it turns up the pressure. As those days tick down, players are expected to be upgrading their gear and airship, and move through London's districts towards their ultimate goal. There is a sense of urgency here that we haven't seen in many modern games.

The choice to include flexible stealth action gameplay was brave, but it appears to have been carefully balanced. There are multiple systems at work, from gadgets that let you blow up traps or hack robot guards, to abilities that enable you to smash through doors or hide yourself in a cloud of steam. Everything is unlocked with cash, meaning players will constantly ask themselves if they ought to take the money they've stolen and run, or risk losing it all. There's no cash barrier to finishing a level; it's up to you.

Each level is procedurally generated and restarting is out of the question, an echo of *Spelunky*'s ruthlessness. On the other hand, when players set off an alert this doesn't instantly result in mission failure. It just means you need to start running. Knock out any robots in your way, hack the diminishing cash supplies, then get out.

Every thief is unique and has a name. By snatching 80 per cent or more cash in a level, these characters can gain XP and potentially nab even more loot in later missions. Once they're dead, however, they're dead.

The Swindle's complexity will be the driving force behind its success. It looks unique, exciting and replayable.



■ The cash you nick can go towards upgrading your thieves, your airship or buying more days to work with.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, Xbox One, PS4, PS3, PS Vita, Wii U
Origin: UK
Publisher: Curve Digital
Developer: Size Five Games
Release: Summer 2015
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Dan Marshall is leading the charge on development. He's got a varied list of games to his name already, including the foul-mouthed adventure games *Ben There, Dan That* and *Time Gentlemen, Please!*, as well as the hilarious sex-education game *Privates*. *The Swindle* is his first game with a multiplatform release.

Developer History

Ben There, Dan That **2008 [PC]**
Time Gentlemen, Please! **2009 [PC]**
Privates **2010 [PC]**
Gun Monkeys **2013 [PC]**

High Point

Mr. Marshall's endeavours to bring the grotty realities of sexually transmitted diseases to teenage minds in *Privates* won him a BAFTA award in 2011, in the Learning-Secondary category.

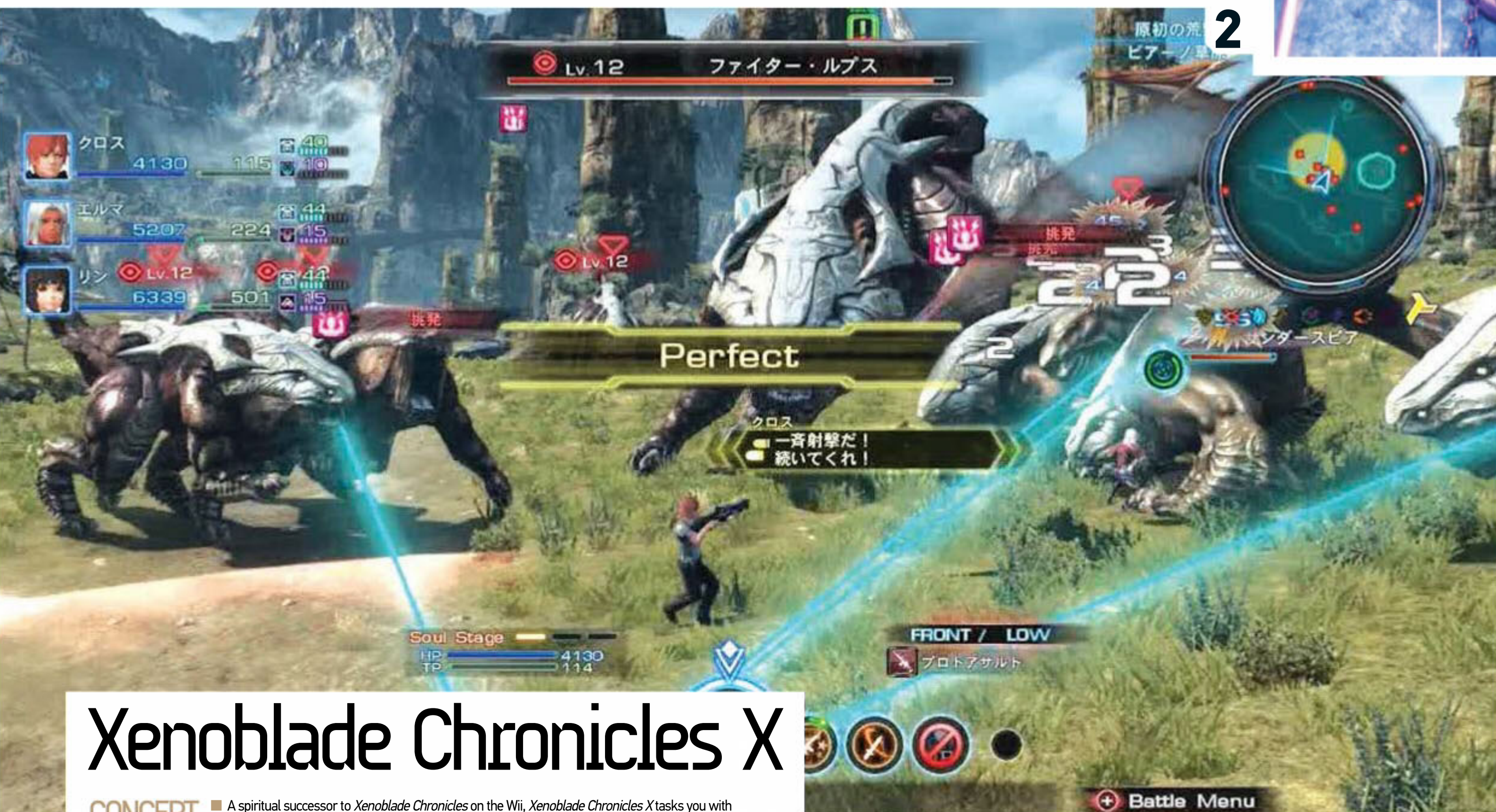



the Gadget Show LIVE
GET YOUR TICKETS NOW AT GADGETSHOWLIVE.NET
8–12 APRIL 2015
NEC BIRMINGHAM
SEE, TRY & BUY THE VERY LATEST TECH ON THE MARKET
Headline sponsor of the Super Theatre:
Currys PC World
Download the official Gadget Show Live app
Powered by:
guidebook
THE UK'S LARGEST TECHNOLOGY EXHIBITION
Spanning the equivalent of almost 7 football pitches and stuffed full with exhibitors showcasing the latest technology, this is an unmissable event for any gadget lover! The show is also much more than just an exhibition - with free to attend theatres, international inventions, gaming tournaments, interactive features and of course the spectacular live Super Theatre performance featuring the Gadget Show presenters. The UK's biggest technology event is back, tickets are selling fast, so get yours today!
In partnership with:
WIRED
Stuff
WHAT HI-FI? SOUND AND VISION
T3
i The concise quality newspaper
HOW IT WORKS
WorldMags.net



1





2

Xenoblade Chronicles X

CONCEPT A spiritual successor to *Xenoblade Chronicles* on the Wii, *Xenoblade Chronicles X* tasks you with collecting ejected stasis pods scattered across Earth during an alien battle

It'll make you want to play with Dolls again

It might look like one of the most inaccessibly Japanese games to grace our pages, but there's something to be enjoyed by everyone in *Xenoblade Chronicles X*. Yes, there are giant mechs that carry starry-eyed anime characters into battle with huge monsters, but there's strategy too – in line with the kind of light strategy that you'd employ in the *Mass Effect* games – and there's exploration. Seamless, totally open exploration. Think *Dragon Age*, think *The Witcher*… think *Skyrim*.

Xenoblade Chronicles was a resounding success on the Wii; very few other games put the hardware through its paces like *Chronicles* did. *Chronicles X* wants to build on that success and use its predecessors' foundations to push further into the mainstream, showing the West that the Wii U is worth more than its sales figure suggest. *Chronicles X* wants to validate the Wii U the way its forebear validated the Wii. That's a far bigger task, though, as we're sure you'll agree. But if any developer is up to the task, it's Monolith Soft…

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Wii U
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Monolith Soft
Release: TBC 2015
Genre: Action-RPG
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

Operating out of Tokyo, Japan since 1999, Monolith Soft is most well-known for the *Xeno* series of games, but has also worked on other more notable licences – *Final Fantasy*, *Dragon Ball Z* and various Capcom properties included (mostly in *Project X Zone*). The studio also helps Nintendo with coding its *Zelda* games.

Developer History

Namco X Capcom
2005 [PS2]
Dirge Of Cerberus: Final Fantasy VII
2006 [PS2]
Xenoblade Chronicles
2010 [Wii]

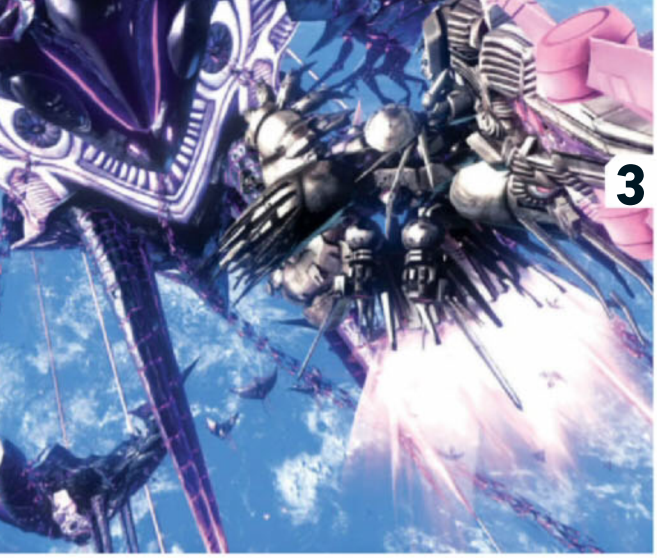
High Point

After Bandai Namco sold its stake of the developer to Nintendo, Monolith has made some great games, but it was *Xenoblade Chronicles* that proved that the Wii was just as valid for core gamers as well as casuals.

1 BY CREATING A WHOLE NEW STORY…

THINK OF *XENOBLADE* a bit like you'd think of *Final Fantasy* – all the games share a selection of tropes and design choices, but each one stands alone in terms of narrative and characters. *Chronicles X* might carry a slightly more confusing title than the logically numbered *Final Fantasy* games, but don't expect to see Shulk, his trademark blade, or any of the cast from *Chronicles* in 2015's *Xenoblade* offering. Instead, we're being treated to a story where two alien forces are battling above the skies of Earth, creating huge collateral damage and forcing humans to flee to other planets. We follow the events of the White Whale – an American ship headed for the planet Mira.

3



4



5



"Players can customize everything about the main character's appearance, including gender, shapes, height, skin color, voice and tattoos"

PRESS RELEASE MONOLITH SOFT

2 BY RETAINING ELEMENTS THAT MADE PREVIOUS GAMES A SUCCESS…

ONE OF THE most widely praised aspects of the original *Xenoblade Chronicles* was its battle system – a real-time, action-based affair that revolved around your manual actions versus your team's automated attacks. It was like the Gambit system in *Final Fantasy XII*, but a bit more in-depth. This system will be basically the same one found in *Chronicles X*, though Monolith has stated it's keen to incorporate fan-suggested improvements into the system too. The Wii U pad will also allow players to have access to a map at all times, as well as data about native flora and fauna on Mira and an insta-warp ability to make quick travel easier.

3 BY FILLING THE GAME WITH HUGE MECHA 'DOLLS'…

THE GAME'S DIRECTOR, Tetsuya Takahashi, has stated that after 15 years at Monolith Soft, he feels he's finally managed to create a satisfyingly deep and distinctive sci-fi world – one in which people and robots co-exist, something he says has been a vision of his since childhood. This, it seems, has been achieved via the 'dolls' – the mechas that tower over humans in the game, that are used as methods of transportation, transforming into tanks, motorcycles, or hovercrafts. They have a consciousness of their own, too, linked symbiotically to their pilots… Is this the *Neon Genesis Evangelion* game we've dreamed of?

4 BY CREATING A STUPIDLY IN-DEPTH CHARACTER CREATION MODE…

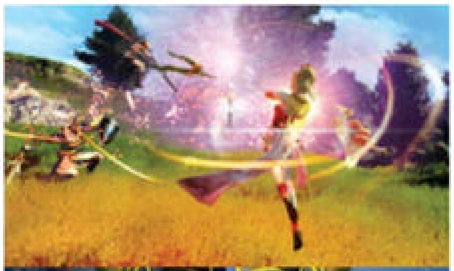
SHULK MAY HAVE been the most persistent thing to come out of *Chronicles*, but it looks like the spiritual sequel is doing away with a defined character model. Instead, you've got the option to create your own character in *Chronicles X* in a creator that feels similar to *Phantasy Star Online*'s oft-celebrated tool. Thing is, unlike most creation tools, *Chronicles X*'s implants anime eyes onto your character's face, and in the 3D art style the game is taking, it can end up looking unnerving. With this level of customisation, it seems the online capabilities of the game might end up being quite MMORPG-ish…

5 BY CREATING THE BIGGEST OPEN WORLD AVAILABLE ON WII U

THE WORLD OF *Xenoblade Chronicles X* is so extensive that Monolith Soft was actually considering shipping the game on two discs. Takahashi wants to create the absolute biggest game possible on the Wii U. In gameplay we've seen players launch themselves off cliff-faces as big as the ones you'd see in *Monster Hunter* or something, nose-diving deep into a chasm that's probably bigger than the whole original *Chronicles* game. Okay, it probably isn't, but the fact you have open skies to fly in *as well as* huge holes to jump into makes us think this world is going to be more than just size over substance. It could be the best open world on Wii U.

■ Below: While there are some nice textures in the game (Cloud's hair looks *amazing*), we're a little underwhelmed by the overall graphical quality. Still, if it plays well, it doesn't matter, right?







INFORMATION

Details

Format: Arcade
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: In-house
Release: TBA
Players: 2

Developer Profile

Square Enix started out as a videogame developer primarily focused on the Japanese branch of role-playing games, but as the industry moved into the new millennium, the publisher/developer changed tact, and began to train up its Western arm, whilst still maintaining an incredibly strong Japanese presence.

Developer History

Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn
Multi [2013]
Kingdom Hearts 3D: Dream Drop Distance
3DS [2012]
Tactics Ogre: Let Us Cling Together
PSP [2010]
Final Fantasy X-2
PS2 [2003]

High Point

Final Fantasy XII diverges wildly from the turn-based stat-mashing of *Final Fantasy X*, and took it in a more semi action-orientated direction, upsetting many but mastering the genre in the process.

Dissidia Final Fantasy

CONCEPT ■ All the heroes of the various *Final Fantasy* worlds clash in epic battles that can probably alter the shape of the world, or something. There'll be crystals involved

A tale of souls and swords (and crystals)

Final Fantasy is the only big gaming franchise missing from the arcades, isn't it? Everything else has got some kind of branded cabinet repping the brand amid some of the most lucrative walk-through zones in gaming, so the only question we were asking ourselves as we watched the blistering nonsense of the *Dissidia Final Fantasy* is 'why hasn't this come out sooner?'

The Japanese arcade fighting scene has never died, per se, but it lay quiet for a while – grabbing the big hitters before their console releases, but rarely trying to innovate hugely. Then, recently, something happened – in the prefectures around Tokyo, development companies have been plotting and planning: we've seen Harada take *Pokémon* to the arcade with *Pokken Tournament*, ArkSys' *Persona 4 Arena* has erupted across Akihabara and Shibuya, and *Tekken 7* is getting a huge exclusivity window in the Japanese arcades, too. Aside from *Tekken*, it's notable that the other two big hitters are cross-overs – taking non-fighting game franchises into experimental territory within the genre.

In light of this quiet resurrection, Square Enix has taken advantage of a gap in the fighting market with its previously-dormant *Dissidia* IP: the game will feature three-on-three brawls which could, in theory, feature six player action across a cabinet network. Being able to play as literally every hero from the games (spin-offs included) is a huge perk, too. If the previous *Dissidia* games are anything to go by, the cast of fighters is going to be *huge*.

> "If the previous Dissidia games are anything to go by, the cast of fighters is going to be huge"

Since *Dissidia* isn't a 2D game, but more of an arena based fighter, it's likely the three-on-three gameplay will get incredibly frenetic, especially if the supporting magic comes back from the previous games. It's interesting also to consider how the balancing will work – the PSP versions of the game were RPGs at their core, revolving around stat building, levelling up moves and equipping items. Unless Square Enix introduces a system similar to Bandai Namco's 'passports' – whereby you can store your data from play-to-play, machine-to-machine – the RPG elements won't be present… which means each character will *have* to specialise in a discipline: Cloud will become an aggressive pressure builder, for example, whereas Terra might focus instead on support magic and zoning. It'll be a total game-changer – a genuine arcade innovation in how the three-on-three bouts will operate.

There are no plans to bring the game to console, for now, but we know how the arcade genre works – give it year or two and there'll inevitably be a port. We'd hope so, too, because we can't imagine any cabinets making their way to the UK in a hurry…



■ Above: We're curious to see how the three-on-three mechanic plays out and how Square Enix has addressed the RPG-lite systems that were the main point of the game in the PSP versions.


Retro Gaming Books
Premium Quality Art Books For Every Gaming Fan
FUNSTOCK EXCLUSIVE
commodore 64
Commodore 64: a visual Compendium
BITMAP BOOKS
AMIGA
FUNSTOCK EXCLUSIVE
Commodore Amiga: a visual Compendium
BITMAP BOOKS
PUSH > START
The Art of Video Games Book
Includes Vinyl LP of classic game soundtracks
FREE UK SHIPPING
funstock.co.uk
USE CODE: RETROGAMER FOR 5% DISCOUNT
facebook.com/funstockgames | twitter.com/funstockgames
All logos, trademarks and artwork are the property of their respective owners.

SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

STRENGTH OF THE SWORD ULTIMATE

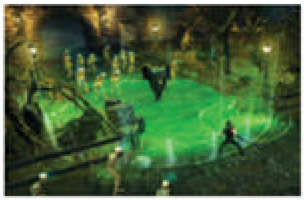
Format: **PC/PS Vita**
Publisher: **Ivent**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q3 2015**



WHEN IT comes to successfully funding a Kickstarter project, it's all about combining ambition with solid mechanics and a killer art style. Ivent managed this with *Strength Of Sword Ultimate*, the enhanced version of its PS3 fantasy brawler *Strength Of The Sword 3*. More armour and weapons are being introduced alongside new game modes, such as co-operative and competitive PvP action. It was great on PS3, and it'll be even better on PS Vita.

VICTOR VRAN

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Haemimont Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q2 2015**



HAVE YOU been desperate to play a crossover between *Diablo*, *Torchlight* and *Van Helsing*? Well, that's a deal that would likely only be struck by the dark lord himself, so you'll have to make do with the next best thing, *Victor Vran*. While a big departure from Haemimont's traditional field of expertise – dictatorial simulation games with the likes of *Tropico* – it does look fun if you've grown tired of grinding through Blizzard's action-RPG offering.

RENOIR

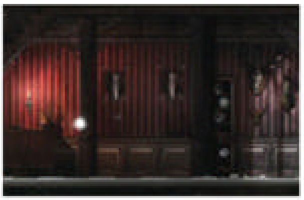
Format: **PC**
Publisher: **SoulBound Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q4 2015**



WHAT IS it about lingering melancholy notes of a piano that scream 'gritty noir adventure'? *Renoir* is heading to Kickstarter later in the year, but SoulBound Games is already getting its Unreal Engine 4-powered puzzle-platformer out there for the world to see. While there's the promise of original puzzles, these games live and die by the writing and voice acting, so here's to hoping it can bring in enough cash to be sorted on both fronts.

GOETIA

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Ynnis Interactive**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q3 2015**



THERE'S SOMETHING appealing about the supernatural, especially when it's presented in such a unique format. *Goetia*, set in the haunted English Blackwood mansion during WWII, is an adventure game that charges players with the role of the living-impaired. That's right, you play as a ghost looking to discover what the Blackwoods did with its "fanatical experimentations." A demo is available from the official site.

ARMY 21

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Indiegama**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2015**



THERE ARE plenty of games out there that let you take on the role of a soldier in an army, but how about one that truly lets you take the lead? That's the idea behind *Army 21*, a new indie game that pits up to 60 players across six teams in a procedurally generated base attack and defend game of military simulation. It's still early days, but the early response is positive, if not a little bewildering.

BESIEGE

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Spiderling Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2015**



HAVE YOU ever wanted to conquer the world? Well, you should probably start by immediately seeking the proper doctor-certified assistance. But while you're waiting for the NHS to come pick you up, give *Besiege* a try. Utilising a smart physics engine and gorgeous art, *Besiege* encourages you to construct medieval siege engines and lay waste to everything in sight… or just mess around with the robust physics engine.

BATTLE FOR THE SUN

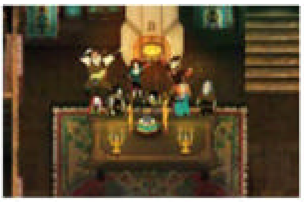
Format: **PC, iOS, Android**
Publisher: **Appsolutely Studios**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2015**



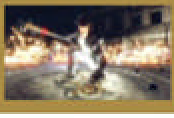
DO YOU recall Midway's *Area 51* series? Imagine that and you're on the right path to wrapping your head around Appsolutely Studios' debut. It can be tough for aspiring developers in the FPS scene, but *Battle For The Sun* has solid mechanics and AI behind its somewhat underwhelming graphical presentation. It recently passed through Greenlight, so expect it to be available soon enough.

CHILDREN OF MORTA

Format: **PC, PS4, PS Vita**
Publisher: **Dead Mage**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q3 2015**

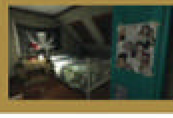


SOMETIMES IT'S impossible not to be drawn into new releases. *Children Of Morta* has that instant appeal, offering the most vibrant pixel art and spellbinding presentation that we've seen from an indie release in quite some time. It's got more than looks behind it though, as it blurs the lines between narrative and rogue-like adventures – *Sword & Sworcery* meets *Rogue Legacy* or *Crawl*, if you will.



CANCELLED – Shadow Realms (PC)

BioWare has only gone and cancelled *Shadow Realms*, its first all-new IP in just about six years, and it sounds like the in-development *Mass Effect 4* is largely to blame. Let's hope *Mass Effect 4* is worth it.

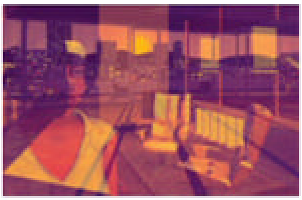


CANCELLED – Gone Home (Xbox One, PS4)

Sad times for console owners. *Gone Home* is no longer in development for Xbox One and PS4, so keep those fingers crossed that *Tacoma* can make the platform leap.

SUNSET

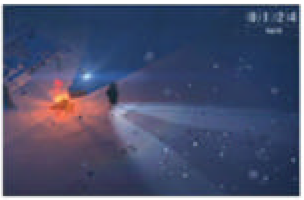
Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Tale Of Tales**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q1 2015**



NARRATIVE-DRIVEN first-person videogames are so in vogue right now, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't take notice of the ones attempting to do something different. *Sunset*, set in the sun-soaked Seventies, drops you into the shoes of a housekeeper. Will you complete your mundane cleaning tasks or rummage through the possessions of your employer, a notorious dictator? We both know the answer to that… now, where did we leave that mop?

IMPACT WINTER

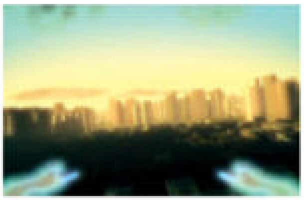
Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Mojo Bones**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2015**



COULD YOU survive for 30 days in a desolate, frozen wasteland? That's the question Mojo Bones is asking as it gets prepared to unleash *Impact Winter*, its suave post-apocalyptic survival title influenced by *Don't Starve*, *The Thing* and *Oregon Trail*. Take lead of a small band of survivors, hunt for supplies, and try to keep it all together – all while trying to block out the amazingly tense Mitch Murder soundtrack. *Impact Winter* is crying out for a PS Vita release.

MEGATON RAINFALL

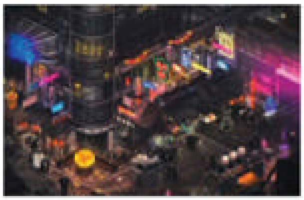
Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Pentadimensional Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2016**



AREN'T YOU tired of superhero games with restrictions? We might often control beings of immense power, but we never get to unleash it. Pentadimensional is looking to change that as it begins development on its first-person superhero game, *Megaton Rainfall*. It's ambitious, as it tries to transmit the sense of power and freedom of Superman into your hands, but whether it can be pulled off remains to be seen.

SHADOWRUN: HONG KONG

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Harebrained Schemes**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2016**



THE RETURN of *Shadowrun* has been one of the biggest Kickstarter success stories, so it's no surprise to see Harebrained Schemes back with another instalment. This is an all-new, full-length standalone entry into the cyberpunk tactical RPG – this time taking place in a magically awakened Hong Kong in 2056. Thanks to its ludicrous over-funding, there's even going to be a host of side-quests, extra missions and new weapons.

TERRARIA: OTHERWORLD

Format: **PC, PS4, Xbox One**
Publisher: **Engine Software**
Developer: **Re-Logic**
ETA: **Q3 2015**



TERRARIA STRUGGLED to escape the 2D *Minecraft* comparisons, but developer Re-Logic is hoping to end that with its 'not-a-sequel' return to the series, *Terraria: Otherworld*. Set in an alternate dimension, it throws players into a deadly struggle to restore order to a world that has been overrun by evil. It looks to have more structure and RPG elements throughout than the standard *Terraria* sandbox experience.

ELITE: DANGEROUS

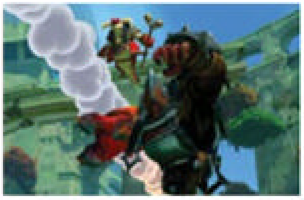
Format: **Xbox One**
Publisher: **Frontier Developments**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q2 2015**



"*ELITE: DANGEROUS* on Xbox One will be the complete and authentic *Elite: Dangerous* experience. It will not be 'dumbed down'," revealed Frontier founder David Braben, and that makes us immensely excited. *Elite: Dangerous* – Frontier's incredible space-sim – will be making its console debut on Xbox One, with the promise that gamers will share the same "overarching narrative and galaxy state" as PC players.

GIGANTIC

Format: **PC, Xbox One**
Publisher: **Motiga**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q3 2015**



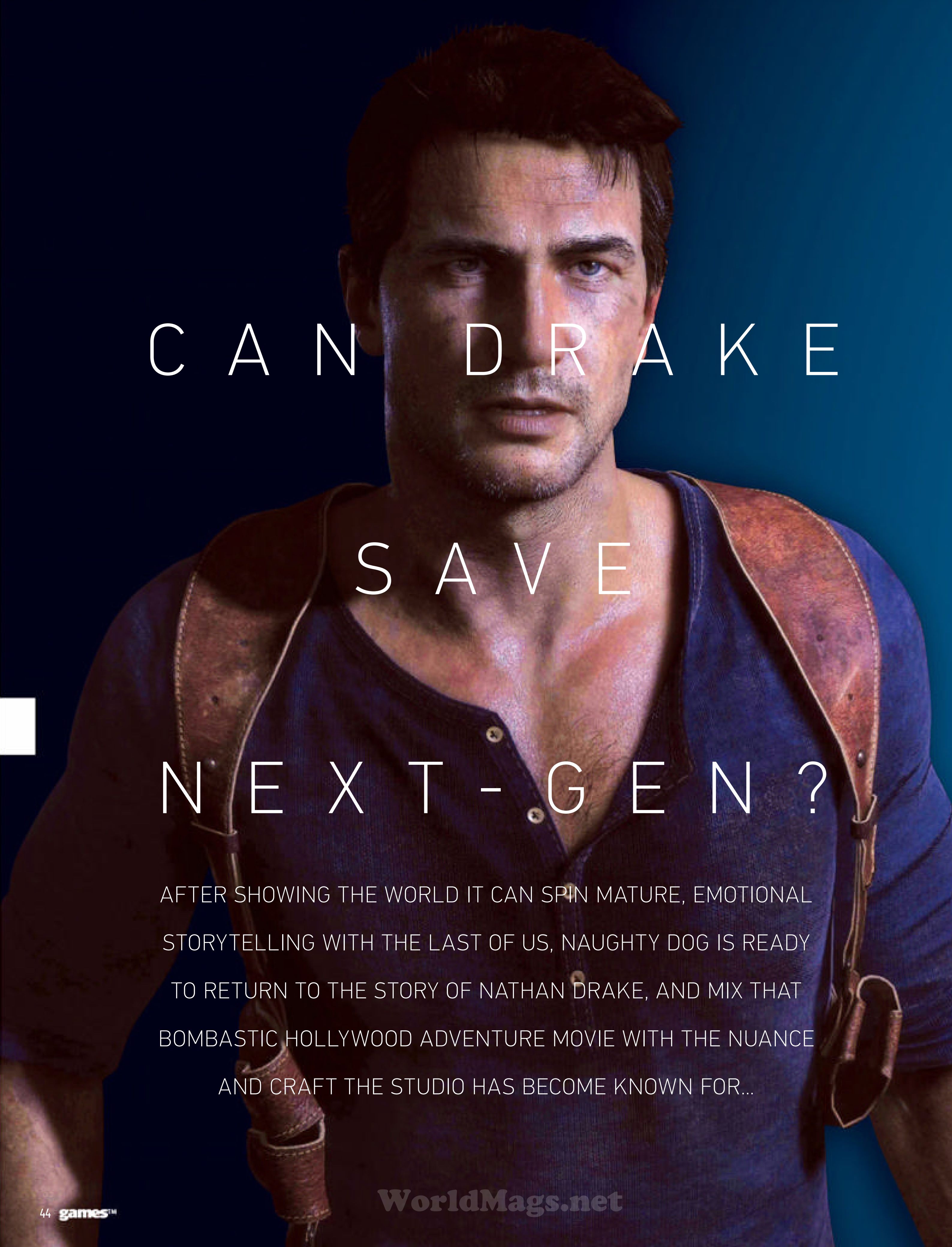
MOTIGA IS looking to embrace the MOBA push on consoles with *Gigantic*, its five-on-five, third-person battle arena game. As with all MOBAs, you'll be selecting a unique hero with an array of powers and play styles, battling towards the goal of toppling your enemy's guardian. Beautiful *Legend Of Zelda: Wind Waker*-style cel-shaded art and Windows 10 to Xbox One cross-play sets it apart from the pack.

ADVENTURES OF PIP

Format: **PC, Xbox One, PS4, Wii U**
Publisher: **Tic Toc Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q3 2015**



ARE YOU feeling a little burnt out on the deluge of retro-grade 2D platformers released in recent years? Well, stop being cynical and give one more a look. *Adventures Of Pip* tasks players with moving through a dangerous world a hero that is comprised of one pixel. As Pip evolves into 8-bit and 16-bit versions, you'll be able to tackle some of the more difficult monsters and puzzles.



CAN DRAKE SAVE NEXT-GEN?

AFTER SHOWING THE WORLD IT CAN SPIN MATURE, EMOTIONAL STORYTELLING WITH THE LAST OF US, NAUGHTY DOG IS READY TO RETURN TO THE STORY OF NATHAN DRAKE, AND MIX THAT BOMBASTIC HOLLYWOOD ADVENTURE MOVIE WITH THE NUANCE AND CRAFT THE STUDIO HAS BECOME KNOWN FOR...

"Do you think there's been a game this generation that has been a standard bearer for what we can expect from this new generation?" we ask Josh Scherr and Ricky Cambier – writer and lead designer of *Uncharted 4*, respectively.

There's a pause. Eventually, Josh says "*The Last Of Us Remastered*?" Both Naughty Dog developers laugh – of course Scherr didn't mean it, not really – but the writer's still got a point: *The Last Of Us* is as much of a current-gen game right now as you're going to get. Graphically, it hits upon all the expectations PS4 players have; functionally, it experiments with new ideas (the 'buddy' mechanic with Ellie, to illustrate); and narratively, it pushes the boundaries of what we've seen interactive fiction achieve. Scherr's joke might not be so far from the truth.

"The life cycles of these consoles is incredible, to be fair, and it's hard to say where they're going to go and what trends are going to take off," he continues, "and that's for both fans and the industry. Just look at the first *Uncharted* compared to *The Last Of Us* – that's amazing, that's crazy."



● The *Uncharted* series has always been known for its focus on movie-like insistence on light peril.

Cambier's mention of *The Order: 1886* intrigued us – we conducted this interview just after the game launched, and the blogosphere was still in the midst of its violent response to Sony Santa Monica's experimental 'short form' game. We asked Cambier if Naughty Dog saw the gaming audience as a group that was becoming harder to please, and harder to target with specific games.

"We're in this interesting space in the market where you've got these $60 games competing for space with these 99c – or even free – games, and then there's the smaller, independent games, too," Cambier explains. "So the important thing for us is that we make a quality entertainment experience throughout… we'd rather make a ten to twelve hour game that's positively solid throughout than make a 40-hour game that's padded out with filler that drags and gets boring. We don't want to waste people's time by artificially inflating things. I think, really, what people want is a good, quality experience with good pacing and great production values."

Surely that was the vision Sony Santa Monica set out with – taking gaming's obsession with cinema to its logical conclusion? *The Order* was a truly cinematic game, in the original sense of the word: it relied on mise-en-scène, constant action, a three-act structure. It even applied a thin layer of film grain over its lens. It moved away from this televisual idea of episodes – levels, if you will – and did its own thing. Yet, the gaming community rounded on *The Order*.

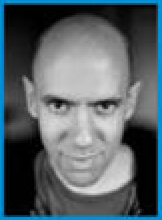
"WHAT'S EXCITING IS THAT WE'RE STILL EARLY DAYS WITH THE NEW SYSTEMS… IT'S ALL UP FROM HERE, AND THAT'S EXCITING"

"We're still early days with the new systems," continues Cambier, *Uncharted 4*'s lead designer, "and obviously the first round of things that came out, a lot of that was cross-gen ports that just up-resolutioned their assets for the PS4.

"There were a few new titles – like *Killzone: Shadow Fall*, that were pretty damn impressive looking for a launch title. *The Order: 1886* is one of the best looking games I've seen on any system ever, too. But what's exciting is that we're still early days [with the PS4]; if you look at the first *Uncharted* and how that looked versus how *The Last Of Us* looked… I have difficulty fathoming that we'll have that kind of graphical leap in the next several years. The reality is, we probably will as we learn the systems better, so it's all up from here, and that's exciting."



● Ricky Cambier, lead designer on *Uncharted 4*.



● Josh Scherr, *Uncharted 4* lead writer.

Uncharted is cut from the same cloth. A cinematic adventure, not one of the three games lasts longer than 12 hours, and they all feature Hollywood-inspired action sequences, traditional cinematographic framing techniques and even the standard overarching story arcs you'll find in any successful filmic trilogy. So how did Naughty Dog react to *The Order: 1886* – did it panic the studio, did it make the developers question the games they're making? Of course it didn't.

"On some level we pay attention to the industry, I guess, but when »



● The jungle scenes are becoming a staple part of the *Uncharted* series – it's a good job Naughty Dog keeps finding ways to make the levels deeper, more realistic and more immersive.

» we're making our story we never think 'Well, how long *should* this be?'" explains Scherr. "We focus more on the character arc, where we need them to get to, what story beats we need to hit, what we need to hit them with, what small arc do our characters *have* to have right now, and what mechanics can we use to sustain these beats and make sure it all happens together."

It's a process that's natural to any storyteller in any medium – let your characters do all the legwork, don't cram them into boxes, don't let the eight- or five- or three-point story arc dominate the story that's unfolding in front of you. Games are more complicated; you need to take into account how your players are going to explore, how they're going pace themselves. Traditional narrative boundaries go out of the window. Naughty Dog makes its own rules, and that's why everyone else looks up to it. No-one tells stories like Naughty Dog, because no-one tries to – the studio is practically writing the rule book when it comes to interactive fiction.

"So we've got the major story arcs, and all the other arcs in between… for us it all comes down to pacing, and making sure every macro beat and micro beat works exactly when it's supposed to," continues Scherr. "We're not trying to make anything last a certain time – we ask 'Is it working?', 'Are we getting everything we can out of it?', 'Can we expand it?', 'Can we explore this more – or better – later on in the game?' For the narrative side, I can't say it enough; it's always about how these narrative beats scale. You have to make sure they're on point because that's how you get your players to keep playing your game – to make them care."

It seems like a pattern of development the studio got into back when it was under the direction of Amy Hennig and Richard Lemarchand with *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves*. The writer and design lead, respectively, departed during *The Last Of Us*' production, but the development ethics established during their tenure seem deeply ingrained into Naughty Dog's DNA, kept alive by creative director Neil Druckmann and game director Bruce Straley through *Uncharted 3* and *TLOU*.

"Every *Uncharted* game continues to push for this sense of adventure and wonder – it's about exploring places, right? Literally going off the map, going uncharted, but keeping you on the stick," Cambier tells us when we ask about what the driving philosophy is behind the game, and if Naughty Dog's work on *The Last Of Us* altered their goals for the project. "We know [staying in control] creates a sense of adventure in the player – you think of some of the biggest moments in the franchise's history, like the train scene in *Uncharted 2*, the airplane sequence [in *Uncharted 3*]. The player gets to be hands-on with those all the way through; that's something that's fairly unique. So now, after three games, we've got a taste for that, especially after exploring the more intimate side of adventure as a studio with *The Last Of Us*. We want to get those big moments and make them a little bit more emotional, connected. More personable."

It's a trend we're seeing more and more of now, in games that are driven to committing the player to their worlds over anything else – *Half-Life 2* planted the seeds of player-reliant agency in the minds of consumers and developers alike, and now we're seeing game-makers really take advantage of how they can give the end-user a narrative experience that feels shaped by them, the whole way through – and not just in the setpieces, and not just with QTEs and button prompts, either. Remember how cathartic it was to just play football

"YOU TAKE CONTROL AWAY FROM THE PLAYER AS LITTLE AS POSSIBLE SO THEY FEEL AS ENGAGED AS THEY CAN"

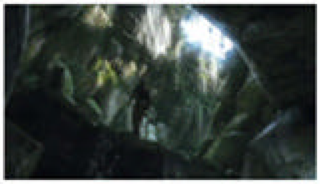


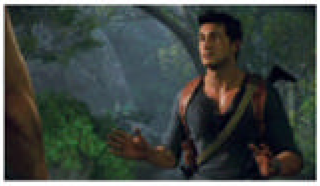


● Combat in *Uncharted 4* promises to be more in line with the rest of the game's design ethic – focused on cinema.



● The setpieces Naughty Dog is known for will be back in *Uncharted 4*, but will keep you 'on the stick' for more gameplay.





● Exploring the Island of Saint-Marie is going to take its toll on Nate – both physically and emotionally.

with some kids in a Tibetan village after all the close calls and near-death escapes in *Uncharted 2*? Expect to see more of that kind of emergent contrast.

"Ideally, you take control away from the player as *little* as possible so they feel as engaged as they can with what's going on," reveals Scherr. "That makes us look really closely at our story beats and think about how we can make as much of each individual section playable, rather than just have these scenes be a passive experience. That's something we've gotten progressively better with as we've gone on – the first *Uncharted* had some lovely moments, but you weren't really in control of them, so for *Uncharted 2* making them available was a big goal.

"Likewise, we took that even further with *The Last Of Us*; the whole sequence at the end with the hospital was intended to be a cutscene, but we realised it would be much more powerful if it was on the stick, so we made that change near the end of production, and it improved the scene *so* much more. We're always looking to do stuff like that that merges story with actual gameplay."

The standard discourse tends to revolve around the new generation of hardware increasing visual fidelity, leading to games that pick away at the borders of the uncanny valley, trying to push into the realms of photorealism. But Naughty Dog isn't interested in that, no – it'd rather innovate in areas closer to its heart: storytelling. Cutting edge graphics will only get usurped by some other shinier, newer title in a couple of years anyway, right? So why aim for photorealism when you could instead wrap your game's visuals around your story instead?

Scherr explains how graphics and narrative can be married, beyond the »



WHY YOU SHOULD CARE ABOUT UNCHARTED

The *Uncharted* series is held in lofty regard by gaming communities, but why? We've got some handy numbers to help you understand the facts behind the hype…

30,000
● Number of energy drinks consumed during *Uncharted 2*'s development

$20 million
● Budget for Uncharted's development

$20 million
● Budget for Uncharted 2's development

$25 million
● Budget for Uncharted 3's development

55
● Amount of perfect review scores the series has received (via: Metacritic)

5
● The number of attempts Hollywood has made at turning the series into a film

GLOBAL SALES TOTAL **17.41 MILLION**

UNCHARTED: DRAKE'S FORTUNE **4.72** MILLION

UNCHARTED 2: AMONG THIEVES **6.37** MILLION

UNCHARTED 3: DRAKE'S DECEPTION **6.32** MILLION



THE ÎLE SAINTE-MARIE

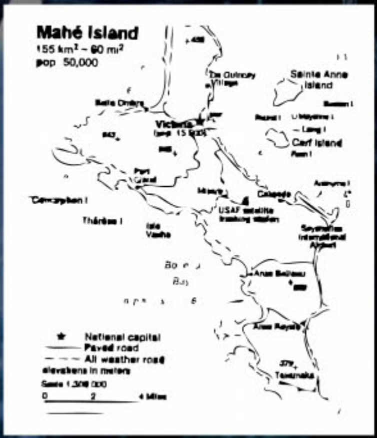
...AND WHAT DRAKE'S DOING THERE

The Île Sainte-Marie is situated off the coast of Madagascar – and it's where the *Uncharted 4* demo that Naughty Dog is parading around the internet is set. Drake and his mysterious new brother, Sam, are on the island because of famed pirates Henry Avery and Olivier Levasseur, who sort of ran the pirate colony of Libertalia. There are also three other islands just off from Île Sainte-Marie that might hold clues as to Drake's presence there…



RÉUNION

A French island with a population of over 800,000. It's also the site of the most valuable heist in pirate history – apparently Olivier Levasseur raided the Portuguese Our Lady Of The Cape ship, hid the treasure on Réunion and threw a cipher into the crowd when he was executed, supposedly leading to the location of his buried haul…



MAHÉ

A selection of carvings discovered on the island in 1923 show a dog, snake, turtle, horse, fly, a keyhole, two conjoined hearts, a young woman and a ballot box. Doesn't that sound like the perfect set-up for a puzzle? These carvings were supposedly made by pirates, too – which makes sense, considering the game's apparent obsession with the salty sea-dogs…



MAURITIUS

Bernadin Nageon de L'Estang (also known by the less wordy moniker Le Butin) tricked a dying pirate captain into divulging the locations of his treasures that were spread across Mauritius. Le Butin apparently found a whole horde of these treasures, but reportedly left four behind when he died, leaving instructions to his nephew who never actually carried out the work. Sounds mighty tempting, right, Drake?

superficial: "In the *Uncharted* games, we've always strived for something that's more along the lines of a 'stylised realism'," he reveals. "Trying to keep in line with reality just isn't all that interesting to us, so what we use that stylistic approach for is, really, storytelling – rather than trying to keep everything consistent to the real world's rules. 'What is the mood of the story at this point in time?', 'What is the mood we want the player to experience here?' That's what we ask ourselves, that's how we decide [how to create the levels]. The nice thing about being on PS4, too, is that we can push that [stylisation] further than we could on the older system."

Cambier – more versed in the design side of the game – chimes in. "We're still trying to figure out exactly what we can do with [the PS4]" he admits. "From a design perspective, it's given us the opportunity to push the scale of the environment so you've got choices



● Smarter AI means that Nate is going to come up against enemies that are far more adept at using their environments to their advantage.

"IN THE LAST OF US, CHARACTERS HAD ABOUT 90 TO 100 'BONES' IN THEIR FACES… NOW, THE FACES HAVE ANYWHERE BETWEEN 300 AND 500"

in the combat setups that are incredibly vast. So we can put that in when we want to. Like Josh points out, on the design side, as well, we can really get the player into a mood: so yeah, there's still times we'll push the player into a very intimate combat space – if we want to layer on extra pressure for an escape sequence or something – it just gives us a wider variety of trees, density, variety, foliage, background environments and how vivid and detailed they are… it gives us all that to play with."



But the PS4 doesn't just open doors to the level designers; cinematic directors and character artists are also creatively empowered. It's been the centre of Naughty Dog's campaign for the game so far – we've seen high-resolution renders of Nate's face bordering YouTube videos, on magazine covers, being passed around on social media – but that's because Naughty Dog is proud of this cutting edge work it's been doing… after all, what's the point in creating a character-driven story without a character you can empathise with?

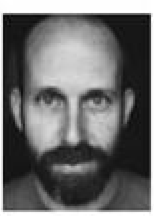
"[The new tech] lets us emote more, with all the 'bones' we can put onto [character's faces] – you pan round the camera to look at Nate's face when he's climbing and you see him grimacing and all this kind of stuff… we're pushing the detail on a macro and a micro level that I think people are really going to respond to," Cabier explains.

"We still do all the same sort of things we did with our previous games. But now, we can just have *more* of it," Scherr continues. "For example, on older games, some of the animations might have been sampled at 10 or 15 frames per second to save memory. That would have just been interpolated by our code [to run at 30 in-game]. While that looked fine, we can now afford to record it at 30 frames per second so that the animation looks that much smoother.

"And, as Ricky was pointing out before, we've completely revamped our facial animation systems – the best way to explain is to say, well… the previous Uncharted games, and in *The Last Of Us*, the characters all had about 90 to 100 'bones' in their faces which we used to moved the meshes around" – think about that, about how detailed Joel and Ellie's pained facial expressions were, how well the game captured the respective actors' – Troy Baker and Ashley Johnson – seminal roles. All that was achieved on the *old* tech.

"Now, the faces have anywhere between 300 and 500 bones," Scherr continues. "This lets us get much, *much* more detail and fidelity in there, so you can really empathise with what [the characters] are saying, and it allows

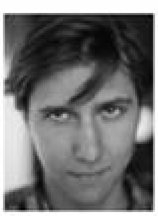
Photography: iki ñ www.photosbyiki.com



● Bruce Straley, game director



● Christian Gyrling, lead programmer



● Kurt Margenau, lead game designer



● Neil Druckmann, creative director



● Christophe Balestra, Naughty Dog co-president



● Evan Wells, Naughty Dog co-president



● Nolan North, actor: Nathan Drake



● Troy Baker, actor: Sam Drake



● Naughty Dog has always been known for its ability to push the hardware it's working on to its limit – *Uncharted 4* is no different.

» us to hit certain poses that we couldn't quite hit before… it all allows us to tell our stories better, to animate our characters better – we hope it's going to be something you all notice, rather than just be a technical marvel; something that really ties into the characters and emotion in the game."

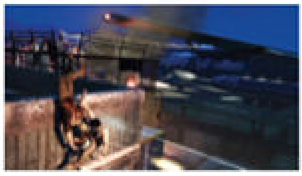
Another way the developer plays with the presentation of story and the game's inherent action is with camera – the way Nate is framed by the semi-dynamic camera is very telling of the type of story Naughty Dog wants to tell. Especially since *The Last Of Us* defined the studio in a certain light – in some ways, *Uncharted 4*'s more gung-ho action-oriented approach to setpieces will be the developer's way of avoiding cliché, of not becoming a victim of its own tropes.

"The difference between *The Last Of Us* camera versus the *Uncharted* camera is basically… well, in the *Uncharted* camera you're further back, you can see all of Nate,' Cambier outlines. "The *Uncharted* games are all about Drake's mobility, and he's put in dangerous situations – whether he's hanging from something or falling from something, you get that sense of scale, and you need to *see* that.

"In *The Last Of Us*, though, you're tight, the camera is brought way in on Joel. You're up close, there's the sense that there's danger all around you. A whole setpiece can just take place around fighting in an old [supermarket]. It's intimate. Dangerous. Every bullet counts. In *Uncharted*, you've got the island we showed you in the demo and its sense of scale, so you've got this island and its pillars and its rope swings and you need to see some of that, but you still get the sense that there's danger."

"We go with the wider camera for basic gameplay because the [series] is about exploration and wide-open spaces," Scherr continues. "You want to feel the grandeur of these environments and have them pull you in, versus *The Last Of Us,* which is about danger lurking around every corner. By restricting your view a little bit, we forced the player to constantly look over their shoulder, scouting for threats. The camera choices alone add to the tone of any game."

"I THINK THIRD-PERSON IS A STRONGER MEDIUM FOR GETTING YOU TO RELATE TO THE CHARACTER"



● It's going to be tough for Naughty Dog to top *The Last Of Us*, but in going back to an old IP, the studio seems confident enough.

We ask the developers why they choose the third-person approach to their games; we've read (and written) enough about why the first-person perspective is typically associated more with making a player feel agency for their character – seeing the world through their eyes, living out their actions and so on. So in a story that's driven by its protagonist's arc, why does Naughty Dog always want to go third-person?

"For me personally," muses Cambier, "if I can't see the character… well, I want to know what they're going through, you know? I've always felt more connected to the protagonist in third-person games because of that. If I'm playing a first-person game, I get to a cutscene and the camera comes out







BROTHERS IN ARMS

Naughty Dog has doubled down on its efforts to create believable supporting AI since a few players complained about Ellie's wandering in *The Last Of Us*, as Ricky Cambier discusses…

"We knew [Ellie's behavior] was a little bit of a trade-off in *TLOU*, and it's something we've wanted to address for a while. When we wrap up a game, there are things we look at and know we want to do better and make better, but you've got to distribute your production time. Especially in a game like [*TLOU*], it would have been more frustrating if Ellie was just altering everyone.

"You know, everyone's always on about graphical fidelity, but we're doing the same amount of work on the same side with AI, both in terms of the enemies you encounter and the capabilities of the partners that are with you. This game is going to be a big story about Nate and his brother, so it's really important to show how they react to each other, how they move around, how they interact. The capabilities of the PS4 help us even further in that regard, in terms of how much time we can spend on the AI's decision-making, whether that's talking about the ally with you or the enemies that you're fighting, who are forcing you to take advantage of the full toolset that is Nathan Drake."

and I see my self and I think 'Oh yeah! That's what I look like!' [laughs] For me, that comes with a bit of a disconnect. I think third-person is a stronger medium for getting you to relate to the character as a protagonist."

And isn't that what *Uncharted* is all about? Remember back to the *Uncharted 2* reveal, how Nate suddenly became the face of the PS3. We saw a demo of him, up on that E3 stage, and where before people had seen *Uncharted* as a smaller addition to the PS3 exclusives line-up, with that showcase, with Drake leaping around, his handsome adventurer's face scorched by the sun, cut with shrapnel, we saw Drake transform into this new action hero, the saviour of the PS3.

'Sic Parvis Magna' reads the inscription in Drake's ring – or 'greatness from small beginnings'. Looking back to the reveal of that motto in *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune*, it really feels like Naughty Dog knew what it was doing way back in 2007. It took the studio two games to really carve out a place on the PS3, but – from what we learned from Cambier and Scherr – it looks like the studio has figured out how to do it in just one game this time around.



COULD STREAMING HURT THE INDUSTRY?

WHY PEWDIEPIE IS MORE POWERFUL THAN MIYAMOTO



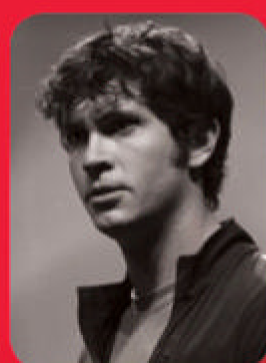
HOW GAMES ARE ADAPTING TO YOUTUBE

HOW YouTube IS CHANGING GAMING FOREVER

REVEALING THE NEXT YOUTUBE TREND-SETTERS

WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS FOR VIDEO STREAMING





Images: Gage Skidmore
Source: YouTube.com/markiplier (2 years of Markiplier!!)

WHO ARE THESE NEW GAMING SUPERSTARS?

After all the fights over copyright infringement fell away, one of the greatest forces in gaming today emerged, and YouTube became dominated by gamers more popular than the biggest music acts. What does it mean for the future of gaming and how is the industry adapting?



Who's more famous? PewDiePie or Cliff Bleszinski? Who is more likely to be recognised walking down the street by a group of 14-year olds, Stampy or Hideo Kojima? Only a couple of years ago such questions would have been completely ridiculous and even now they carry a faint aura of absurdity to them. The answer feels like it should obviously be the developer, but a shift has taken place in the way we consume our games and there's a generation of players who know their gaming commentators better than the creators. YouTube is changing gaming forever.

But don't take our word for it. When we spoke to Cliff Bleszinski about this very topic, he was the one who suggested younger gamers don't know who he is any more. "We've been visible, but never underestimate the amount of ADD the world has," he warns us. "There are plenty of people out there who know who I am, who Arjan [Brussee, Cliff's co-founder of Boss Key Productions] is and some of the various employees here, but does your 14-year old who's watching PewDiePie on YouTube give a shit? No. In many ways we have an established legacy, but we're very much starting over."

Is it about culturally having a short, easily distracted attention span, though, or simply the shifting sands of a fast-moving industry that's quick to embrace new technology but sometimes a little slow to fully understand it? There is a new force and voice for gamers building and it's one that only a few developers and publishers have successfully engaged with. But success in the YouTube arena can mean success beyond. Can there be any doubt for instance that *Minecraft*'s gigantic explosion into the mainstream was aided and abetted by streamers and Let's Players around the world?

"It's nice to see that a lot of game publishers realise the potential of YouTube gamers in relation to marketing their games," YouTuber LaurenzSide tells us. "Usually they will send you an email explaining a new game that they've released and give you an early access code to get it for free with the hope that you will play it on your channel to showcase it. It's really a win-win for both sides, they should do it more often!"

Others, though, are perhaps a little more cautious. "We don't always do it, as we don't want to flood the channel with advertisements, but sometimes we do!" JonTronShow presenter Jon Jafari explains. "It's actually rare that I hear back from the actual developer of an old game, but sometimes it happens."

And it is a growing concern that, while in many ways YouTube content creators are becoming the new front line for gamers to get information and opinion on games, there's a blurred line between genuine endorsement and advertising. The parameters of what is considered ethical in games journalism aren't necessarily as tidy for YouTube.

"It's a tough area to get into because on one hand, you want YouTube videos and creators to retain that 'homemade' video feel, which you lose once you start working with companies,"

> "I look for something I like to call 'reaction value' and that is 'Does it seem to have enough things throughout the game to make me scared or laugh?'"

LaurenzSide admits. "On the other hand, you want to be truthful to your viewers to say whether or not your opinion on a game is your own and not a paid advertisement. I try to be 100 per cent transparent in saying, 'I got this free from a company yes, *but* this is my honest opinion on it.' I personally have never accepted being paid to say what they want to hear about their game or company and I intend to keep it that way."

Really up until fairly recently, the greatest concern with regards to relationships with game makers has been that they would pressure videos to be taken down. "Yes, that has been and I think always will be a concern," Jafari tells us. "It's why I think this style of video is extremely limited without huge legal teams backing you up and talking directly to the companies that made the games, and it's understandable. But I started doing it because I wanted to try something new, and it's been worth it every step of the way!"

Jafari's videos have tended to be reviews, while LaurenzSide leans more towards Let's Play style experiences. Both are likely to be encountering far fewer copyright infringement notices from publishers now as they embrace video sharing. There are risks involved, but for the most part getting your title seen by gamers on YouTube can only prove to be beneficial.

Ubisoft is perhaps a good example in the last year of a company that has felt the good and bad of YouTube sharing. On the one hand, word got out pretty fast about issues with *Assassin's Creed Unity* and *Watch Dogs*, in large part thanks to gamers posting their glitches and bugs on YouTube. Conversely, though, *Far Cry 4* had its fair share of odd in-game behaviour, but sharing these moments only seemed to raise the game in people's estimations. It began to reveal those hidden, emergent moments that made the game worth playing.

"The games that are going to appeal most to YouTubers are the ones that they can describe or talk about to their users," Bleszinski tells us. "It's going to create these YouTube moments where people make it look easy. If you go to the ballet or to an MMA event or a sports event like the NFL and Drew Bries tosses that ball while being threatened by 280lb guys... He makes it look easy. So, the more skill-based and describable your game can be the more likely you are to have these commentators commenting on it."

Coffee Stain Studio's **Armin Ibrisagic**, creator of *Goat Simulator*, has a similar view. "I think a good place to start would be for game designers to not just design games that are fun, but to design games that are fun to watch as well," he tells us. "Now before people start sending me anthrax in my mail and pipe-bombing my apartment – I'm not saying that having a game that's fun to play versus being fun to watch is mutually exclusive. I think it's very possible to do both, as long as you keep



Most YouTube successes are driven by strong, unique personalities or team dynamics.

"It's odd to think of bugs as an asset and flaws as something that can foster a fanbase"

2014's most viewed games

The franchises that dominate YouTube

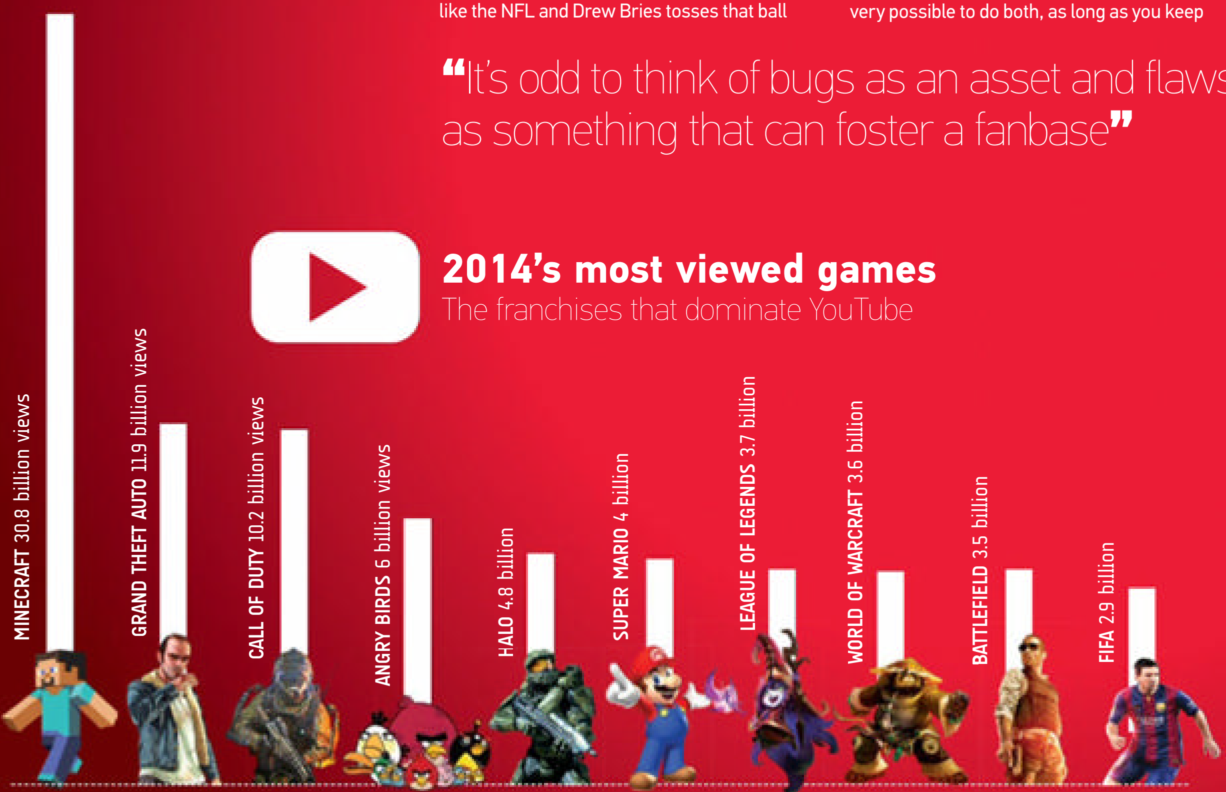








Image: Gage Skidmore

it in the back of your head from the start. *Minecraft* is an amazing example as it's by far the most popular game on YouTube, probably because there's always something new to see due to the randomly-generated world."

We got a similar analysis from Jafari. "The topic of discussion in the video, first off, has to be relatable to a wide audience," he explains. "Take my recent episode on *Barbie* games for an example: everyone knows who Barbie is and therefore will have a point of reference when viewing her games. The whole point of the show is to point out the oddities and absurdities that lie in these old games. I am not usually only trying to show off a bad game, I am trying to relate the crazy videogame logic back to the real world, it's funnier that way. Another thing is if it's possible to make a story arc out of the whole thing. We like to start strong and end strong, we don't want the episode to be trailing off, you know. And thirdly, the most important thing, you've got to look for that little bit of indefinable magic. Can't put a price on that!"



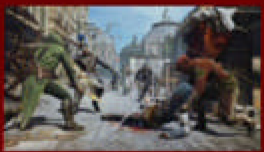
>> THERE ARE SOME other practical elements worth considering, too. "The age of the game plays a big part in whether it will be relevant in YouTube searches or subscriber's newsfeeds," says LaurenzSide. "The length of the game is important too as viewers tend to lose interest over a long gameplay series, so the shorter the better. I also look for something I like to call 'reaction value' and that is, does it seem to have enough things throughout the game to make me scared or laugh? That's probably the most important because sometimes even the most seasoned gaming commentator can have trouble improvising jokes over a boring game."

For Ibrisagic it is also about embracing the faults in your game and letting them become an asset. "Oh, absolutely, bugs are amazing," he enthuses. "Removing bugs that negatively affect the gameplay, such as crash bugs, is something that we prioritise very highly. But in today's game industry where there are so many triple-A games that are completely scripted from start to end, I think a lot of people welcome the surprise and unpredictability of bugs. If you get hit by a car in *Goat Simulator*, you'll usually just ragdoll around like an idiot and then get back on your legs again, but once in a while the physics bug out and it sends you flying across the map. Maybe you'll land face-first into a building and get stuck. Maybe you'll land on a bunch of explosive canisters.

"Once, a player emailed me a screenshot of his goat hanging in the air with its head stuck in the sky after he had collected all the explosives in the game in a single place and head-butted them. It was awesome and hilarious, and I think the unpredictability of bugs is something truly magic that makes every player's experience different from someone else's." »



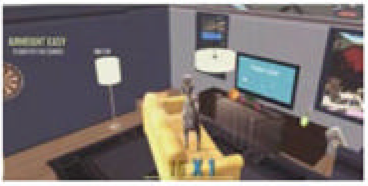
● Regularity is the key to success for many channels as multiple videos a week give viewers a reason to return.



● For all the bad reviews, how many gamers bought *Assassin's Creed Unity* just because of how weird and funny they thought it looked on YouTube?

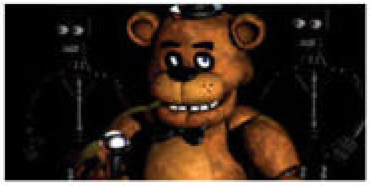
YouTube Winners

The games that were changed forever by YouTube coverage



GOAT SIMULATOR

More or less born with YouTube in mind, *Goat Simulator* hit all the right notes. It built on the meme of simulation games seemingly becoming more and more niche, it embraced its ridiculous physics and it begged to be played with and shared. Perfect fodder for YouTube.



FIVE NIGHTS AT FREDDY'S

This horror experience is built around classic jump scares and creepy creatures. And that means it's perfect for reaction videos so that commentators can play, make weird faces, and delight their adoring subscribers. *Five Nights At Freddy's* is all over YouTube.



DAYZ

The simple zombie apocalypse premise drew in a lot of attention and while some may have fallen away as it built to a final product players really wanted, YouTubers kept plugging away, exploring every weird occurrence they could find, later getting deep into the game proper.



SKATE 3

Several years after its initial release, PewDiePie featured *Skate 3* in a series of videos and it got a second wind. Others started streaming and then Game had to ask EA to print more copies of this four-year old game to meet demand. A pretty amazing turnaround for an unsung classic.

10 MOST VIEWED GAMING CHANNELS

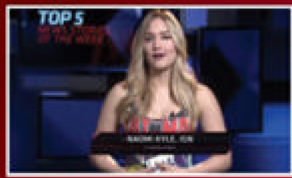
Who are the forces shaping gaming today?



PEWDIEPIE

Subs: 34,963,509
Views: 8,038,700,762

1 The new face of gaming, the voice of a new generation and easily the most subscribed and watched YouTuber, PewDiePie is a real phenomenon. His humour and approachable style has given him massive appeal and his choice of games is having a massive impact on game sales.



IGN ENTERTAINMENT

Subs: 5,650,287
Views: 3,993,166,517

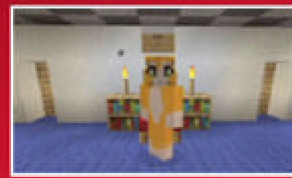
2 This gaming media enterprise has been at the forefront of internet games coverage for a couple of decades now, so it's no surprise to see its video views so high, but even this channel is dwarfed in subscriptions by some of the 'amateurs' it's competing against in this growing market.



ROOSTER TEETH

Subs: 8,111,806
Views: 3,662,171,911

3 Famously the team behind *Red Vs Blue*, the animated show that used *Halo: Combat Evolved* for its actors, Rooster Teeth has evolved into a massive gaming channel with chat shows, podcasts and the offshoot of Achievement Hunter Let's Play videos that set a standard for the form.



STAMPYLONGHEAD

Subs: 5,238,161
Views: 3,019,779,629

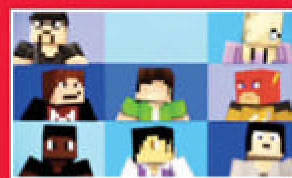
4 Stampy's commitment to daily videos has to go a long way to explaining his success as he tapped into the *Minecraft* fanbase and made himself a great spokesperson for the community. His friendly approach makes him the perfect introduction to Mojang's game for young fans.



BLUEXEPHOS

Subs: 7,258,224
Views: 2,993,817,120

5 This is the main channel for the team better known as Yogscast, which has also found massive success from its series of *Minecraft* Let's Plays and has continued to branch out to new games as its base has grown larger. It even attempted to get its own game off the ground.



SKYDOESMINECRAFT

Subs: 10,871,631
Views: 2,481,020,366

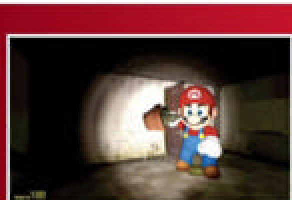
6 Another supremely popular *Minecraft* player with a massive following, SkyDoesMinecraft, aka Adam Dahlberg, and friends explore the world of voxel-based mining with big personalities and great humour. Testing out all the mods they can means there's always something new happening.



THEDIAMONDMINECART

Subs: 5,295,273
Views: 2,314,122,816

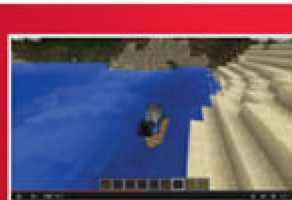
7 As another family-friendly *Minecraft* channel with daily videos, Daniel Middleton's TheDiamondMinecart continues to get new viewers and taps into that insatiable thirst for *Minecraft* content that YouTube loves. It's another indicator of how vital these channels are to a new generation.



VANOSS GAMING

Subs: 11,337,417
Views: 2,235,499,020

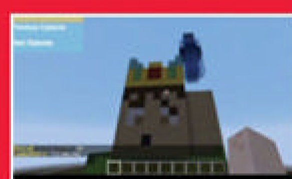
8 Approaching his gaming commentary from more of a comedy angle than pure Let's Play experience, Vanoss, aka Evan Fong, has developed enough of a following to branch out into a number of different games. Basically anything he can riff on is worthy of a spot on his channel.



POPULAR MMOS

Subs: 3,533,006
Views: 1,913,355,758

9 Don't let the name fool you, this is another channel dedicated to the wonderful world of *Minecraft* with a series of different shows showing off various aspects of the game. The regular Mob Battle show, for example, pits in-game monsters against one another. New games and videos are added regularly.



TOBYGAMES

Subs: 6,944,556
Views: 1,888,632,238

10 More easily identified as a YouTube entertainer than some in the gaming world, Toby Turner is a growing force in this list and has the kind of following that means he can branch out from *Minecraft* into whatever the hot new releases may be such as *Evolve*, *Far Cry 4* and many others.

>> IT'S ODD TO think of bugs as an asset and flaws as something that can foster a fanbase. It runs counter to the polished entertainment industry image that gaming has been building for itself. And yet, to us, it touches upon a classic gaming experience: playing with friends. While the modern online gaming experience is one of instant and constant connection and feedback, we are also very disconnected from real human interaction.

We're not even just talking about playing multiplayer games, as this connected gaming experience applies just as much as when we would play a single-player game like *Doom* or *Super Metroid* with friends, terrified of what was hiding behind the next door. Or the exhilaration of battling a final boss shared with someone in the room with you. It's not as common these days, but on YouTube you can watch it happen. We get to see those reactions to players in *P.T.* or see someone defeat the Ender Dragon and that simple exchange is what builds camaraderie. It's as oddly removed and voyeuristic at times, but it's close as we've come in this new online age.

"People seem to *love* the horror genre online!" LaurenzSide reveals to us. "Actually, my top four videos at the moments are *all* horror related videos. I think viewers like virtually





> "I think it brings them back to the old days of kids watching other kids play games in arcades"

having someone to play a scary game with as it doesn't make it seem as scary and they can actually enjoy it." However, she also drew a parallel to the arcade scene. "I think it brings them back to the old days of kids watching other kids play games in arcades. You'd stop and watch someone who's either really good at a game or being really funny playing it. Same thing goes for YouTube, only on a much larger scale. It's like hanging out with a friend at an arcade or playing videogames with them in your living room. In a sense, viewers have someone to react with, laugh with, and be scared with."



● While *Minecraft* is the single biggest game on YouTube, Mojang hasn't spent a single penny on video marketing.

And yet this still doesn't explain how Felix Kjellberg, aka PewDiePie is the most followed and watched streamer on the site (above Rihanna, One Direction, Katy Perry and the official YouTube channel). A relatively unassuming, charming Swedish gamer has built an army of 'bros' that makes him more influential in the modern gaming landscape than Shigeru Miyamoto.

"Ah yes, we have come to the Pewds," says LaurenzSide as we reach the unavoidable subject of all gaming on YouTube discussions. "I'm honestly baffled by PewDiePie's success and probably always will be. Not in the sense that I don't think he deserves it, but for the fact that I didn't think watching someone play videogames would be *that* popular. He definitely hit the 'YouTube lottery' if there ever was such a thing. I believe he's extremely influential now, especially to other gaming YouTubers like myself as well as prospective videogame purchasers… In short, he's currently the face of YouTube gaming, whether other users like it or not."

As an example, we refer you to the summer of 2014 when PewDiePie featured *Skate 3* in some of his videos earlier that year. Not only did it push the 2010 release into the UK top 40 for most of the year, it also lead to other YouTubers checking the game out, hundreds more videos appearing, *Skate 3* leaping into the top 20 during a dry summer of games, an extra 32.9 per cent more units being sold in the first half of 2014 compared to 2013 and retailer Game requesting new copies of the game be produced since it had been out of print.

But while we could analyse the traits that have launched Felix Kjellberg into megastardom and speculate as to the formula he devised to create his success, attempting to repeat it would be fruitless. "People ask me about PewDiePie all the time," Coffee Stain Studios' Ibrisagic tells us. "I think he might be one of the most influential people in gaming today. I think he's a cool guy. But I also think it's crazy to ask people why PewDiePie is so successful. If anyone knew, they'd do it themselves too, right?"

And so people like JonTron have looked to find their own formula; a mixture of honesty, openness and no small amount of randomness. "It's a really strange story, honestly," says Jafari as he tells us about the time he started to see his numbers rise to his current 1.6 million subscribers. "I was leaving California to move to Texas to start the site now known as NormalBoots.com with my wonderful longtime friend Austin Hargrave (known online as PeanutButterGamer), and I decided on a spur of the moment that I hadn't used enough of the California scenery in my videos up until that point. About a day or two before I left I decided to add me singing Katy Perry's *Firework* on the nearby rocky sea »

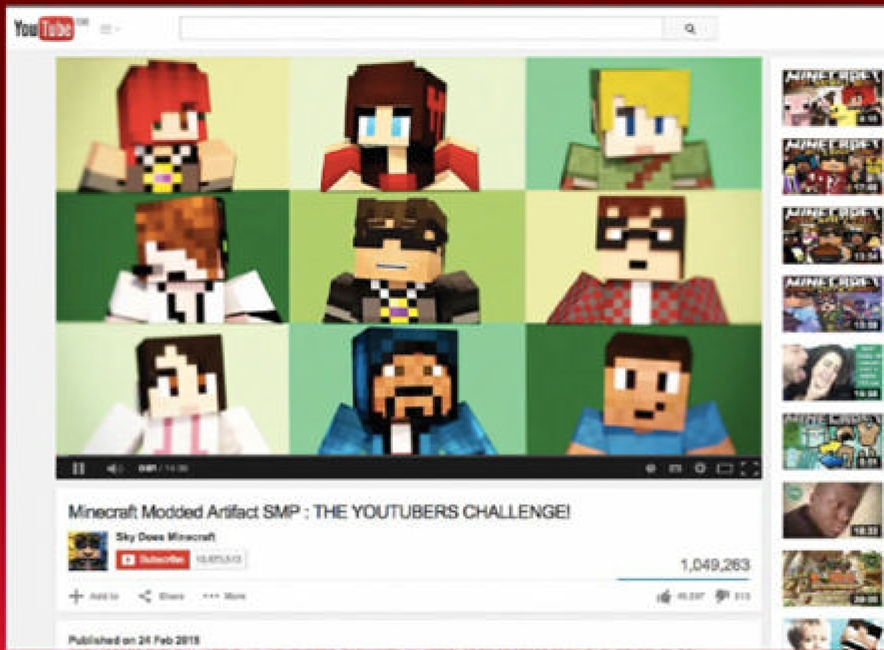


● PewDiePie is far and away the most popular YouTuber around and his rise is inspiring others.

Source: YouTube.com/pewdiepie (Funny Montage #4)

cliffs to the end of my *DinoCity* review… for pretty much no reason. I guess this struck a chord with someone somewhere, because the video got upvoted to the top of the front page of Reddit back in 2011 with a title that was something like, 'THIS is how you do a game review'. The rest is history. I think I'm still in shock from that one fateful moment."

Whatever a YouTuber's route to individual success, the success of the concept means that we're seeing game developers seemingly making their games with social media in mind. *Goat Simulator*, for example, must owe much of its success to how its videos began to go viral after it was announced. What's more, its very gameplay was inspired by watching YouTube clips. "The main inspiration from *Goat Simulator* actually comes from me spending a lot of my office hours watching YouTube videos," admits Ibrisagic. "For some reason



We're beginning to see YouTube channels try out new formats to set themselves apart, but *Minecraft* remains pivotal.

"A relatively unassuming, charming Swedish gamer has built an army of 'bros' that make him more influential in the modern gaming landscape than Shigeru Miyamoto"

I started watching funny YouTube videos of goats messing with people, head butting them, and being a general menace. It made me think 'Hey, this looks funny as hell, someone should make a game out of this!' After the third time I pitched the idea to my co-workers, it finally worked and they jumped on the project with me. So I would definitely say that YouTube was a big inspiration, but maybe not in the way that people would think initially."

But what about really targeting the YouTube market? Can that be achieved intentionally? "The game *Five Nights At Freddy's* is a perfect example of what can happen when YouTube videos do well with a game," LaurenzSide points out. "That creator's sales ended up going through the roof and he even made a sequel and two iPad games from its success! From my personal experience I don't think 'big-name' developers make their games with YouTube in mind just yet, but I could be wrong. Most definitely do when it comes to marketing those games though!"

>> **CERTAINLY THERE'S NO** shortage of official trailers and content from the big publishers on YouTube, but a recent estimate put the balance at 19:1 for community-created content versus official promotional material. "I think a lot of the bigger companies are so strict on their embargoes and keeping their secrets and following their PR plans that they're losing a lot of good potential coverage," was Ibrisagic's assessment and looking at which games are really breaking through, you would have to admit it's largely the community driven, open, indie world that's finding greater success these days.

As games channels have seen more success, so new streamers have been drawn to the service and new models have emerged. For LaurenzSide who joined, left and then returned to her channel, the shifts were easy to see. "The biggest change I noticed was YouTubers having their channels seem much more like a business," she reveals. "Professional graphics, professional video equipment, merchandise shops, donation buttons, schedules, etc. None of that existed back when I first joined YouTube! The second biggest change I noticed was the

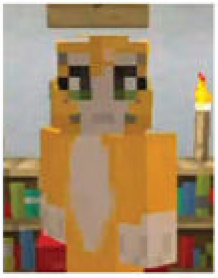


huge rise of gamers on YouTube. Also, a lot of the bigger YouTubers I used to watch had fallen in popularity and some of the smaller YouTubers I watched now had hundreds of thousands (even millions) of subscribers! I kind of kick myself for not staying with it when I first started because I may have been further along at this point!"

But as has been mentioned, that formula is so elusive it's a very tricky thing to predict success, and it's hard to predict how YouTube might affect the industry in the coming years. "I think we can all agree that it's going to have a big impact, but in what way is very hard to say," Ibrisagic tells us. "The game industry changes faster than any other industry I know. Six years ago, everyone was making Facebook games because of Zynga. Three years ago, roguelikes and zombie survival games were in, and they still are. I have no idea what'll happen in the next three years, but I'm sure it'll be interesting to follow."

Jafari is similarly flummoxed by the question of where things will go next. "Quite honestly, I have no idea," he admits. "This is such a transient industry right now. Everyone is trying to stage a foothold, and who knows which stone or which crevice will keep? It's the story of human history, time and time again! It's the ancient struggle for land and power! It's the gold rush! It's like that time you wished you bought Amazon stocks in the mid Nineties!"

What's clear though is that developers are adjusting to this new force and the industry is taking note. The fears that YouTube videos would hurt the games industry like some form of soft piracy simply haven't emerged and instead we have a new generation of opinion-makers and trend-setters having their say on what games will rise and fall. It's a fascinating and ever-evolving new world. And, thankfully, it's quite entertaining too.



Stampy Cat explains it all

We discuss the rise of gaming on YouTube with one of the best in the business, Joseph Garrett, aka Stampylonghead, aka Mr Stampy Cat

• So how did you get started with making videos?

Well, I actually began trying to become a gaming journalist. When I first started doing videos I was doing reviews, I ran a tournament, I was doing guides and top ten countdowns of things, so that was the route I was trying to get into. I did that for about a year and a half and no one really watched it, but I still did a video almost every single day, so that was my beginning on YouTube.

• When did you see your views and subscribers rise?

When I switched from very serious scripted content to Let's Play videos and that very much coincides with when *Minecraft* came out on the consoles. I did my first *Minecraft* video in May 2012, and it wasn't immediate, but I noticed that instead of 20 views I would get 100 views and then 150 views and then a gradual slope leading up from there.

• Do you consider yourself an opinion-maker, YouTube celebrity or something else?

I guess it's technically celebrity, but it's a new kind of celebrity. I don't think that you can deny that YouTubers of a certain size have a big influence, possibly even greater than traditional celebrities. If you look back at Jonathan Ross when he was presenting on the BBC, he had a huge audience, but he couldn't really have full say over what he said. The BBC could kind of control it; it was their programme. The way we're doing it, we're just people and we can say whatever we want and we have no one to answer to.

It's really powerful and amazing, but also really scary. It means you have a lot of responsibility. I think it's nice that we're not perceived as normal celebrities because that makes us a lot more relatable compared to a TV host where there's that disconnect of watching them on a TV. It kind of seems like another world. Online you can directly message people and they'll respond and it just seems like you're more of a friend to people rather than a celebrity.

• What do you consider to be your responsibility to your fans?

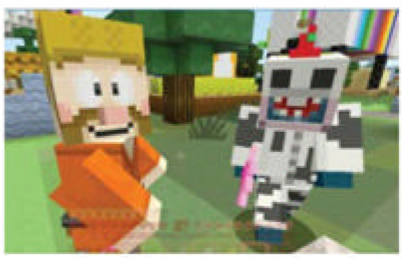
I think it's just keeping up trust. I mean, it's different for me compared to most YouTubers because my audience is so young and I'm constantly making sure that my audience watching my videos trust me and also their parents. If I started swearing in videos that's probably not going put off too many children, but it would put off the parents. I would have been very conscious of that. It's just making sure you remain genuine and there's going to be nothing 'iffy' about your content. It's something that I take very seriously and I have a set of guidelines that I live by.

Mainly, you don't want to be exploiting an audience. I think people know I'm going to be pretty squeaky clean in terms of the age rating for the content, but you want to make sure that when there are opportunities that come up when you have a large audience, you want to make sure you're not taking advantage of people who trust you and watch your content.

• How have you handled dealing with game publishers over the years?

Well, I'm partnered with a multi-channel network and that's Maker Studios and any business opportunities or any approaches from companies or publishers or developers go through there, which means they can kind of vet them and make sure they're legit. A lot of YouTubers can get exploited or underpaid and not understand what they're signing so having some kind of management or representation helps.

It's tough as there are not many opportunities I have because of my audience. I'm not going to be advertising a new phone or something in my videos. It's really tied into gaming, and then the amount of deals that are games relevant to my audience aren't many. It's something that I've not done much of but it's out there. I think it's a much bigger deal for YouTubers that are a little smaller and are on the verge of being able to do this as a career. That could be the difference between them being able to work on YouTube full time to it being a hobby. Those deals can



be a very big thing for them, but for me it's not really something that's on my radar.

• You don't want to be perceived as having been corrupted by these outside influences looking to take advantage of your audience?

Yes, exactly. It would be very obvious if someone took a deal that wasn't a fit to their channel. If they're suddenly making a video that you would assume they wouldn't normally make or not sound 100 per cent genuine when they're talking about something… The audiences aren't dumb, they are going to pick up on that.

I think it's a bigger issue on the journalism side rather than what I'm doing because people aren't coming to me for a review. They're coming to me for an entertaining video. If I produce a video for a game, which I might not have done normally, but it's still entertaining, it doesn't matter so much because I'm not directly trying to influence what people are going to purchase and people aren't coming to me to find out whether they should buy a game or not. People are coming for 20 minutes of hopefully entertaining content. So, it's probably not as big a deal, but it's something that you've got to be very conscious of.

• Do you think YouTube is changing how developers are making their games as they attempt to appeal to commentators and Let's Players?

Yes, definitely. I think there's a very specific sort of game. I can see a game now and I can see that they've made it hoping PewDiePie is going to play it. And a lot of the times it works. A lot of these physics-based games are funny to watch; it's very obvious. And I think it's kind of nice, because even though that is going to be exploited a little bit, because in the early days of YouTube you would see a lot of publishers seeing these videos on YouTube and going 'Hey, they're making money off my game, we need to stop this'. And they would go hard on copyright.

But then things like *Minecraft* come along and they see how big *Minecraft* has become as a direct result from YouTube – I don't think anyone can argue with that – and they can see, 'Wait a minute, this is the best free advertising we cold ever have. Rather than spend hundreds of thousands of pounds producing a trailer not many people are going see, if we just send our games to people and they do videos about them and are genuinely enthusiastic about it and people are going to watch it, that's the best advertising that you could have'. It's taken a while and not every publisher is there, but I like the fact that publishers now understand the value of YouTube and they're encouraging it rather than trying to stamp it under their boot.

• How do you think things are likely to evolve in the coming months and years for gaming on YouTube?

I think it's hard to predict. I think more and more you're going to see games trying to cater to YouTubers. I think that there is going to be growth. I think that a lot of people talk about gaming content and YouTube Let's Plays and they make it out that it's going to be a bigger thing than it is. I think it's not a fad, it's going to stick around, but I don't think it's the future of entertainment. There's always going to be an audience that wants to see that. There's going to be a successor to *Minecraft* that's going to capture people's imaginations the same way that it did and it's going to be huge. I have no idea what that is and I don't think anyone does, but there's going to be those big games that just work with YouTube.

I could play through any single-player game and I could add my commentary, I could add jokes, but they're really not getting that different of an experience than if they had played it themselves, whereas *Minecraft* gives you nothing. *Minecraft* gives you a blank canvas for you to tell a story and make whatever you want in it. There are not many other game like that, which is why it's been so amazing for me. There's going to be another big game like that, which is going to take off in a big way, but apart from that, I think things are going to settle down for a little bit. I think people are understanding YouTube more now so it's going to seem like less of a novelty, but I don't think there's going to be another huge revolution that's going to change it, at least within the next five years, I'd say.



A NEW THEORY OF EVERYTHING

"THERE ARE GAMES OUT THERE THAT HAVE SOLD ABOUT FIVE MILLION UNITS, AND WERE CONSIDERED FAILURES," SAYS DOMINIC MATTHEWS, PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT NINJA AT NINJA THEORY, TO GAMES™. "THAT'S RIDICULOUS. ABSOLUTELY RIDICULOUS. IT'S THAT UNFORTUNATE CYCLE THAT'S LEAD TO A LOT OF DEVELOPMENT TEAMS DISAPPEARING."

He's not wrong – in 2015, so far, we've seen layoffs hit Sony Online Entertainment's recently rebranded Daybreak Games, we've seen layoffs at EA Montreal, Sega has shed considerable staff during its restructuring and *Elite: Dangerous* developer Frontier has made cuts too. It's the peril of working on triple-A. If your game doesn't shift enough units, the company has to make some money back somewhere, and sadly,



NINJA THEORY'S NEWEST PROJECT, HELLBLADE, IS THROWING TRADITIONAL DEVELOPMENT METHODS OUT THE WINDOW. IT'S A TRIPLE-A GAME WITHOUT A PUBLISHER. IT'S BEING BUILT BY 12 PEOPLE, AND IT WANTS TO CHANGE THE INDUSTRY…

once it gets to that stage, the human value and cost is replaced with nothing more than numbers on a spreadsheet.

"We've created triple-A games for 15 years," Matthews tells us when we ask him why Ninja Theory's newest IP is forgoing the traditional development pattern. "Over the years, the pressure on games to appeal to more and more people has just gotten greater. Because the retail price point is fixed at $60, games can't compete on price. That means the checklist of features that games *have* to have to compete, then, gets longer and longer. As such, development teams get bigger, and therefore budgets get bigger. This cycle results in huge development budgets having to be justified by publishers needing to sell millions and millions of units. If you're a big triple-A game, you need to sell five million+ units to be considered a success."

Cast your minds back to 2013 – Ninja Theory was working with Capcom on the *Devil May Cry* reboot, a game that fans had been clamouring for, petitioning for even. Ninja Theory delivered the game, and sold 1.6 million units – something the publisher saw as somewhat of a failure. Thing is, that's not bad. The game wasn't bad, and those sales numbers weren't bad… but Ninja Theory was considered as having 'failed to deliver' by Capcom's standards – Capcom's internationally-focused, public-facing standards.

This time, though, with *Hellblade*, Ninja Theory is its own boss, and the 12-strong team of developers is making the game *they* want to make. The studio has gone independent – but not really, not quite. Matthews was very clear about where the studio »

A Picture is Worth 1000 Words

Hellblade's art direction ninja – Alessandro Taini – is a classically trained artist and has been with Ninja Theory ever since its first big PS3 hit, *Heavenly Sword*. His approach to concept art is unconventional, in true Ninja Theory style – he opts for portraiture to communicate his ideas, over the more general, often location-based art of larger studios. Taini talked us through the process behind creating each of Ninja Theory's instantly recognisable protagonists…



Dante
The Controversial Redesign

"I tried to make him more of a street guy, still with his red key colour, but with him wearing more contemporary street clothes. You know, he could have picked up his clothes in any high street edgy shop. I did a sketch with the red eyes and dark hair and [Capcom] loved it so much that every time we tried to do it in 3D and it wasn't the same, Capcom was like 'Oh no, that's not right, that's not like the painting!' In the end, the painting was superimposed over a 3D image to try and copy the feeling of that picture! That was the super-early stages, though."



Senua
The Dark Traveller

"I tried not to make a costume for Senua; in my characters, the costumes are simple anyway, a few lines, no more than two key colours with a third for ornament. It's important to give the character attitude more than define them by what they're wearing. So with Senua, we started with the Viking style, but making a Viking is boring to me, so I had to add something special – we are what we come from, right?

"The way we talk, the way we eat, our posture… it's all from our past. Senua has been through Hell, so I think you should feel that, her history. So Senua's [identity] is more about her look, her expressions, and her stance more than any costumes. I started with her eyes, before anything else, because you can get the intensity there, the expression. The rest comes out, all from the eyes. Tameem said, when he saw the first portrait, '[I] nailed it right away'."



Monkey
Straight Out of Legend

"Monkey was a fantasy – the way he looked, the way he acted, the way he was animated, it was all very stylised. He was a character that already existed, you know, there's a lot about him out there already, but we weren't interested in making him the big strong man [you get in other games], it was more important for us to style him out, and make him a real figure of the fantasy."



Nariko
The Studio's First Icon

"The very first image I did for *Heavenly Sword* was a portrait, and I looked at all the master painters, and particularly Rembrandt, because he had a really strong understanding of light and everything, so I painted Nariko's face – just her face – as a present for Andy Serkis when he came to the studio. After that we started to think about the rest of the game, all from that starting point."

saw itself in the Venn diagram of indie/triple-A that makes up the two-horse race that is the modern games industry.

"We've been *very* careful not to call ourselves indie – we call ourselves 'independent-triple-A' – because we don't think we've *earned* the indie label," he explains. "People still want triple-A production values from us, and so we're trying to prove we can still deliver that, but with all the benefits that come with being an independent studio, too. We still want to deliver on those triple-A qualities that we had in our previous games – well, better qualities, ideally – but we're doing it in a way where we're taking creative risks, where we don't have to appeal to everyone."

That's the first thing that struck us about *Hellblade* – it's a game that isn't ashamed of being hardcore, that isn't trying to appeal to the casual gamer *and* the hardcore gamer. Ninja Theory isn't interested in diluting its audience; it's building a product for people that have dipped their toes in the studio's work before, and enjoyed what's bitten them. "Rather than trying to aim for everyone and only hitting a few people, we're kind of doing the opposite and only aiming for a few people: making something that's only for a small group of people," Matthews tells us. "But we're making it *really* appealing to them; we're *really* targeting that niche.

"I'm very comfortable in saying this game is for Ninja Theory fans. Fans of combat games. Fans of engaging stories and the characters and worlds we build. That isn't millions and millions of people. We're pretty open about the numbers we need to hit for *Hellblade* to break even: we need to sell about 300,000 units. Which, compared to five million, is far more tangible." So *Hellblade* will drop you into its world naked, in a gameplay sense. You'll have access Senua's full combat capabilities right at the start of the game – Matthews tells us the team took its inspirations from fighting games: you get Ryu and all his moves off the bat. You've just got to learn to use them. *Hellblade* is the same, there are no skill trees or



PUTTING THE 'MOTION' INTO EMOTION

WHY NINJA THEORY GUTTED ITS BOARDROOM

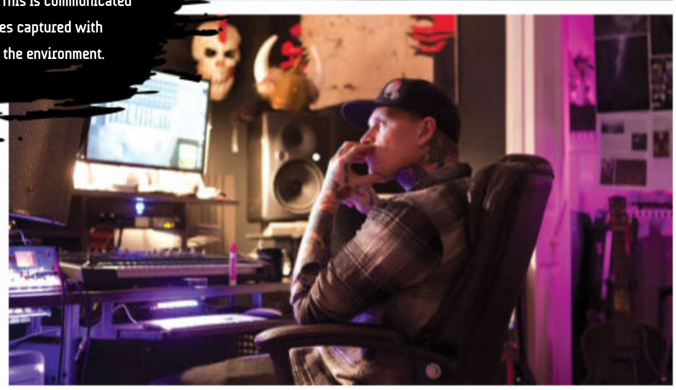
Ninja Theory might be targeting the triple-A/indie niche, but that doesn't mean it's got the budget to play around with that you'd find within Ubisoft or EA. No, Ninja Theory has to keep costs down, and there are various ways of doing that – keeping things you'd normally outsource in-house, for example. Instead of hiring out a motion capture suite off-site somewhere, meaning the small team would have to break up and travel across the country to get the vital animations for the game, Ninja Theory opted to build a suite itself… by ripping out the boardroom and constructing it in there. The team nipped to a local hardware shop, bought shelving struts and supports, mounted the cameras on the custom scaffold, and began filming 'Senua's' performance right next to where the game is being coded. Talk about efficiency!





One of Senua's unique traits is her 'altered perception' – This is communicated by superimposing faces captured with GoPros or Kinect into the environment.





combo lists in sight. You drop into the world as Senua – this warrior descending into Hell – and you're set free. Ninja Theory doesn't want to hold your hand, it wants to chop it off.

"We needed to make each fight feel meaningful, to make every enemy you defeat feel significant, like in regular one-on-one fighters," Matthews says. "In those kinds of games you have to defeat your opponents over two rounds, or you fail. Whether you're playing in Arcade mode or against another person, fail twice and you've lost. Game over. We kind of want that feeling with *Hellblade*: it's life or death. That's why we keep the camera in a tight position, too; it makes you feel up close to that fight, feel the pressure. "

There's no HUD, either – Ninja Theory wants you to get wrapped up in this earthy Viking world it's creating. In combat, exploration and cutscenes, there's only you and Senua. You know the 'hardcore' mode in other games – the one that strips the HUD back? – well, that's the entire *Hellblade* experience. "We want people to be really invested in Senua

> WE WANT PEOPLE TO BE REALLY INVESTED IN SENUA
> DOMINIC MATTHEWS, NINJA THEORY

and her story," Matthews explains, "and any elements that are inherently game-y break that immersion, takes you out of the experience. So we're going completely HUD-less, and that gives us challenges in how we communicate certain things to the player. Health, for example – how do we tell the player Senua is low on health without any kind of bar or meter? At the moment we're looking at representing that in Senua's 'state' – if she's wounded, she looks wounded, she animates like a wounded person. If she's *really* low on health, she's in a critical state, she's actually down on the floor, fighting for her life."

In combining a combat system based on the one-on-one fighting games (that rely pretty heavily on their health bars) with a completely naked game screen, Ninja Theory is breaking new ground. Could you imagine Activision or Ubisoft releasing a game taking those kinds of risks? There is no game out there like *Hellblade*, not quite: there's no formula for Ninja Theory to base its work on. But why is the studio so insistent doing this – couldn't it have just made a spiritual successor to *DmC* under its own IP?

"We can't afford to be like any other games on the market, really," Matthews says, bluntly. "We need to take creative risks here and hope that they pay off. If we're just going to make something that's treading the same path as another game, then we'll lose. Other studios have 300 people on their project, with a $100 million budget. We need to create something that's smaller and deeply engaging… but I think that's what people want, right?"

We can't help but agree – you head to any gaming forum or social media feed and you'll see people lamenting the triple-A model and its reliance on tried-but-tested mechanics and genres. So, if you're not doing that – if you're looking at creating an experience that hasn't really been done before –

THE RISE OF THE VALKYRIE

"It's much more fun to make a female character," art direction ninja Taini tells us when we ask if *Hellblade* was always going to have a female lead, or if it was something decided on later in development. "I think it's much more interesting to see a strong woman and her story than to just see a strong, muscle-man you know? I've never been interested in the stories of typical strong men. You look at Senua, she looks super strong and vicious, but actually she's fragile – it's really interesting, because straight away you want to know *why*, you want to know about her past. And we love that. It makes you care more."

"We didn't take any direct influences when designing Senua, either," Taini replies when we ask whether Suena was inspired by any other characters. "To base her on someone like that makes it a fantasy, you know? And this is about emotions and realism. We wanted to make some allusions to *Heavenly Sword* – because that's what our fans would like – but when I do a character, I just *feel* it, you know? You watch a Miyazaki movie and his characters look similar, but that's because his hands are drawing it… it's funny to see people comment [that Senua] looks like previous characters, but that's just my style."









Senua's journey is taking her into Hell – whether that's an actual Hell or a personal Hell is yet to be determined, though. This image certainly seems to suggest something edging towards a literal Hell…

then where do you go? What do you turn to for inspiration? "We look for references in unconventional places," says Matthews. "In movies, in classical art, in music videos, all that stuff, rather than just looking at other games on the market. We've taken some design cues from a French performance artist, for example, which is something you wouldn't expect a game development studio say! Our attitude is that, well, there's no point looking towards other games to see what they're doing, because, well, they're already on the market!"

Matthews is right – we saw the performance artist in question (Olivier de Sagazan) in action; he wore a latex mask, smothered himself in tar, oil, paint, blood, then writhed around. He's the inspiration behind the enemy design – the cult-worshipping Vikings that Senua runs up against. We haven't seen that before – in gaming, that's rare. It's not a stretch to say that what Ninja Theory is doing runs parallel to Sagazan's wildly experimental routines, either.

"This [method of production] is an experiment. A complete experiment," Matthews admits. "My hope is that we engage players on a deeper level with what we're doing here, going on this development journey with *Hellblade*, seeing it evolve at every stage. When it comes out, I want people to really know what's gone into it, and almost feel like part of the team.

"In development or PR, [with triple-A publishers], you can't take risks. You kind of have to tread the tried and tested path to success. The PR cycle is something that's been in place for years and years and years. With *Hellblade*, we're questioning the way we're developing the game, but it also gives us the opportunity to question the way we look at marketing and PR, too." But Ninja Theory doesn't just want to set a precedent for themselves as a studio – no, that's too small a goal. When you're operating in the triple-A space (even with the 'independent' prefix attached), you take on broader responsibilities – you take on the position of role model, of a peer, of a trailblazer. Ninja Theory wants to prove to itself – to the world – that the way it's practicing development is a legitimate route forward for the whole industry; returning to intimate teams of passionate people and a focused product.

WOULDN'T IT BE FANTASTIC TO HAVE TONS OF MID-SIZE STUDIOS THAT CAN PRODUCE HIGH QUALITY, REALLY CREATIVE GAMES?

DOMINIC MATTHEWS, NINJA THEORY



The concept art certainly points towards something similar to *DmC* in its violent body horror, but the team assures us *Hellblade* is set in a much more real world than its past games

"This is the future for Ninja Theory – we're creating our own IP and we've got creative control over our own games," Matthews concludes. "But we want other mid-size developers to make games like this, as well. Because if we can show this model is a success, or at least *viable*, then wouldn't it be fantastic to live in a games industry where there are tons of mid-size studios that can produce super high-quality, really creative games?

"This isn't about us making millions and millions of pounds; this is about us making a living, making the games that we want to make. If we can do that, we'll be happy. It's a lot of fun doing this, making games. If we can deliver niche games to fans that want them, then it's a model that can work for the players as much as it can work for us."

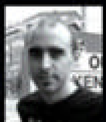


FOR THOSE ABOUT TO ROCK

Why Harmonix thinks it's time to resurrect the rhythm action game

When *Rock Band 3* came out in 2010, there was a fatigue around the genre – people were beginning to get tired of the onslaught on games that tried their hardest to make you feel like a rock star. The bubble burst – plastic guitars and drums kits were relegated from the living room to the closet, and people began to forget.

But with the release of *Rock Band 3*'s final piece of DLC – Tenacious D's *Rize Of The Fenix* – Harmonix made a statement: it's time to return. We caught up with the studio's producer, Daniel Sussman, about why now is the perfect time for *Rock Band 4* to rise up from the ashes and reclaim its rhythm action throne…



First and foremost, why is now the right time to revive *Rock Band*?

Well, we had some good down-time when we were working on some other projects, but it's been really interesting to watch how the [Harmonix] team has rallied around a game that a lot of us have very deep experience with, and a *real* deep attachment to – including myself.

When we were starting to think about why we wanted to bring *Rock Band* back, and why this – right now – might be the right time, we had to go back to it. We went back and started playing it, and played through it *all*. *Rock Band*, *Rock Band 2*, *Rock Band 3*, *The Beatles*… As we were playing them, we realised there are quite a few things we had learned, in terms of our relationship to *Rock Band* and also our maturity and designers and developers.

So we were playing through them, and we could just see all this stuff that we could improve, right? So when we're bringing them back to PS4 and Xbox One, we're going to be looking very closely at the foundational level of those »



"WE ONLY WANT TO MAKE SOMETHING THAT PUSHES THE ENVELOPE AND CHANGES PEOPLE'S PERCEPTIONS ABOUT WHAT A BAND SIM CAN BE"

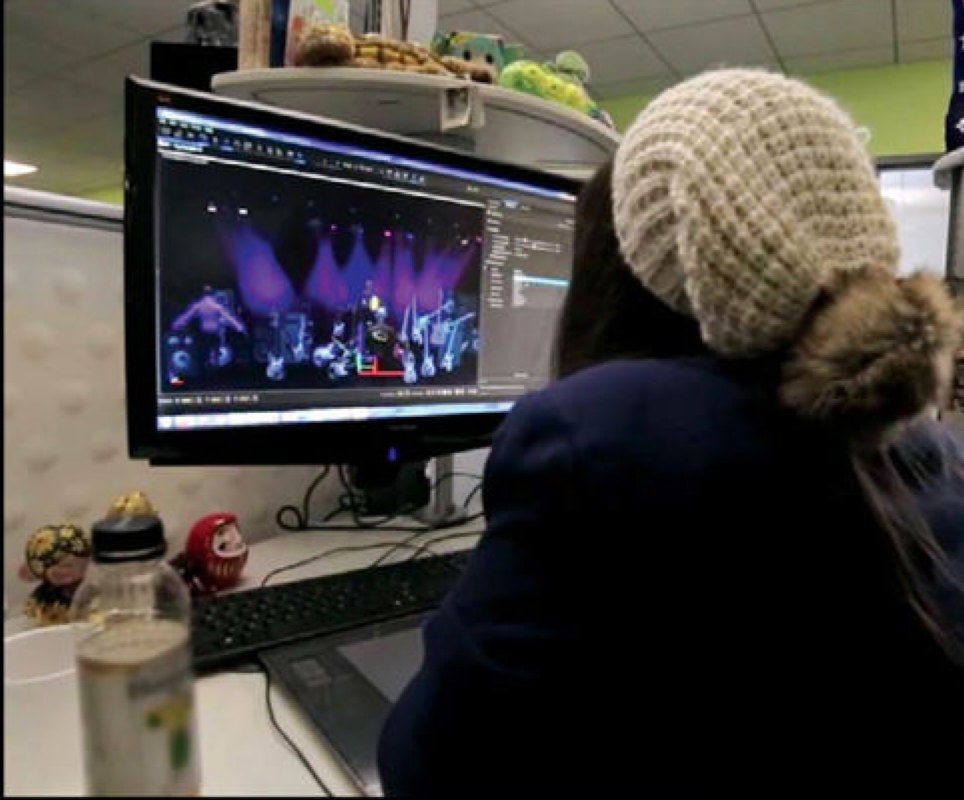
platforms. *Rock Band* has a lot of elements that are pretty simple, and the core fantasy it's about is pretty easy to explain – they're what I love about it the most. But that means that *Rock Band* is elevated to have this evergreen quality: it's a fantasy, for me at least, that *will not* go away. If you like music, you will like *Rock Band*.

You've been away from the property for two and a half years – when did you actually start working on *RB4*?
Well, one of the elements of the studio that's unique this time around is that we have a *lot* of things running in parallel… there are a few things that are part of our over-arching plan that have been in the percolator for quite some time. So we have these small, scrummy development teams working on this feature or that feature and we don't exactly know where these features will fit, but they're fun and cool… we never would have taken [this approach] to development a few years back, because so much of our team was wrapped up in *Rock Band 3* – like 80 per cent of the company were committed to it at the time.

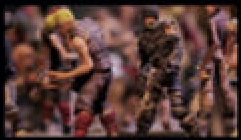
So bits and pieces of the dev team have actually been working for over a year on these features without any real awareness of whether or not they'd end up being in *Rock Band*. We were in the early stages of creative development over [Summer 2014], but things really started to settle in September. That was when we started asking ourselves, y'know, 'What do we want to do here?', 'What's the platform?', 'What's the audience opportunity?'

Where we ended up, well… we only wanted to make something that was designed to push the envelope and change people's perceptions about what a band sim *can* be. We *absolutely* have to innovate, and that's the thing that rallied the team – we've got some really interesting things up our sleeve, and as we're playing with the prototypes, it's already framing my relationship with the game. There are things that we're doing that I miss when I go back to check out *Rock Band 3*. I can't talk about too much just yet, but we're doing some pretty neat stuff.

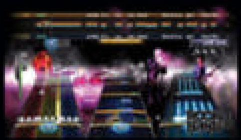
Did you learn anything from the over-saturation of the genre that reached its peak last generation?
Yeah, sort of. During our time down we've worked on some *very* interesting games. Like *Fantasia* – oh my goodness! It was such an interesting game for us to work on – we learnt such a lot about the relationship between music and gameplay. Even looking at the work we did on *Dance Central Spotlight*, getting our heads wrapped around things like DLC entitlements and Xbox One architecture… we learned a lot! It was nice to be able to apply those lessons to another project. It's… it's been really fun going back to a brand that we all have a ton of respect and appreciation for.



■ Harmonix has been closely examining telemetry from past games in order to understand fan expectation.







■ We're not sure exactly how much the general look of the game will change – yet – but expect it to be a real shot in the arm for the brand.

Do you think people still have an attachment to the game, and to the songs they used to play?
You know, *Rock Band* has this huge legacy – a back catalogue that's got thousands of songs – and it's taken us about five years to get there. So each of those songs has been tested, authored, refined… we really want to leverage a lot of that content. So in terms of figuring out what to do going into this game – well, there's a lot we need to do to support that [old] content, and that then frames a lot of the creative choices we make. We don't want to invalidate the library, but it's a *lot* of work, propping that content up on the PS4 and the Xbox One.

Did you have any issues with the licensing from your back catalogue – we know some licenses have expired and you've had to take track packs down before…
We have over 90 per cent of our back catalogue intact. There's a constant communication with the [record labels] around the

SCHOOL OF ROCK

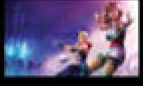
Harmonix has been busy since its last foray into the console version of *Rock Band* – as Sussman told us, it's been the studio's most 'aggressively creative' period. We examined each of the titles Harmonix has released since *Rock Band 3* to see how each could alter the anatomy of the Xbox One/ PS4's first rhythm action hit…

DANCE CENTRAL



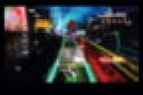
Over three games, Harmonix has proved it's adept at more than just peripheral-based rhythm action – the Kinect-based dance game tracks over 650 different moves. Perhaps *Rock Band 4* will require band members to get some choreography down as well.

DANCE CENTRAL SPOTLIGHT



No Story Mode and no minigames made *Spotlight* a more pared down experience. If *Rock Band 4* follows suit, we could see a game that sets you onto playlists, earning points, unlockables and customisable avatars,…

ROCK BAND BLITZ



Blitz was a game that relied on a standard controller, and released in a digital-only capacity – which perhaps helped Harmonix realise a distribution strategy when it came to looking at how it would deal with *Rock Band 4*'s DLC packaging.



artists and songs we use. We've got a great relationship with them, and they're psyched to go forward with this – especially since we've got a lot of new licences, too…

***Rock Band* was responsible for vast segments of overall music sales in each year of its release – is that something you've considered when constructing this game's playlist?**
[Laughs] Well, that's something we've considered during development. You know, we've spoken to our fans and they see *Rock Band* as their jukebox – their entry point to music and music discovery. We take a lot of pride in that; as we think about the library of songs we have, with *huge* artists in there, there's still a lot of stuff that's new to a lot of people. That's what we aim for with each disc – we need to have some variety in terms of what people know. *Rock Band* is a lot more fun when you know a song, but it's also a great way of getting to know songs intimately. We wear our influences on our sleeve, and we want to bring stuff in to people's living rooms that maybe they're not expecting [laughs].

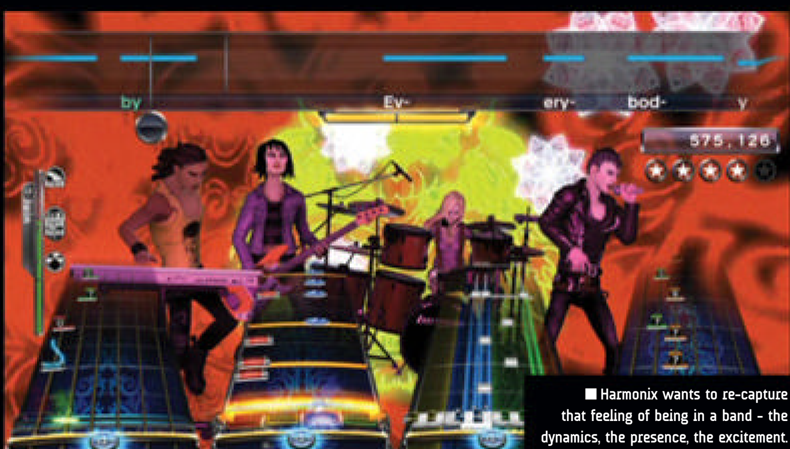
How does the team decide what to put in on the original soundtrack – do you have to fight to get your choices in?
We have a lot of really strong opinions that result in some of the most amazing conversations you can have in a workplace [laughter]. Like… Steely Dan or Rush: discuss. Now, I can't stand Steely Dan, but Greg [LoPiccolo, creative director] *loves* him so we have that conversation, like, every day. I love the fact we don't all agree – it makes us really advocate for the stuff we feel strongest about. That negotiation about what ends up in the game is really fun, and makes for a soundtrack that – trust me – is hard fought. That's exactly what we want.

Did you do any data-mining on *Rock Band 3* to see how people played it – and did that have any bearing on *Rock Band 4*'s development?
We collected a lot of data from *Rock Band 3* – where the achievements were popping, what goals were completed, whether people were playing socially or by themselves, leaderboard action… all that kind of stuff gave us this wealth of data that we can look at and use to refine our efforts this time around. One of the key words we're using to apply to our development is 'focus'. We really want our work to hit as many people as possible with that core *Rock Band* experience.

And all that falls in line with our own experience – we've worked on *Rock Band* for years and years, and we've been playing it as fans for all that time, too. That's true for me, that's true for our folks on the publishing side, that's true for the rest of the development team. Greg has played in bands – he understands the space we're working in really well. That's true for him, for our audio director, for a lot of the folks in key roles in the team. They understand the culture, they understand the brand… we've done our homework. We've had two and a half years down, away from this game, and that's let us come back and play through the games with our eyes wide open and understand what a powerful experience we created.

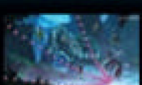
> "We are in our creative prime right now. The stuff we've been putting out over the last few years is the most aggressively creative work we've ever done"

Do you intend to keep *Rock Band 4* a 'live product' – a release that will stay alive throughout this generation?
So we've got a great relationship with our community, and we were emboldened to find there were still a *lot* of people playing *Rock Band 3*, and the response to the *Rock Band 3* DLC we put out recently was phenomenal. So what that means is that I think we're in a great position to look at the life of *Rock Band 4* on the eighth-gen consoles whilst creating a dialogue with our community that will define our decisions down »



■ Harmonix wants to re-capture that feeling of being in a band – the dynamics, the presence, the excitement.

A CITY SLEEPS



Released for PC and Mac only, *A City Sleeps* took on the 'bullet hell' genre – think *Geometry Wars* with a musical twist. Perhaps we'll see something similar appear in *Rock Band 4* as a mini-game, or a way to gel the Story Mode together?

FANTASIA: MUSIC EVOLVED



Fantasia: Music Evolved combines dreamy backdrops and intense rhythmic action with Kinect-heavy body tracking. Sussman says that he wants to 'bring people together in the room'; we're thinking full routines.

AMPLITUDE



Thought it's not been released yet, the Kickstarter project is a reboot of the hardcore 2003 game, due for launch in the middle of 2015. We might even be able to use tracks from the game on *Rock Band 4* at launch!



the road. It's exciting; it's something I feel is unique to this generation of consoles.

So are there any plans for *Rock Band 4* to take proper advantage of all of this new-gen tech and connectivity?
It comes down to these foundational elements we were talking about – I can't say too much right now, but we really want to make sure the features and the content are well-designed and well-managed, complementary of one another, supported by a really strong infrastructure. Just getting to the point where we've got a playable game with enough content, and having [all the tracks] scored, that's a big deal, a fair amount of work. This version [and the connectivity of the new consoles] means that we really have to get that solid *Rock Band 4* foundation worked out [at launch].

"ROCK BAND HAS THIS EVERGREEN QUALITY; IT'S A FANTASY THAT WON'T GO AWAY. IF YOU LIKE MUSIC, YOU WILL LIKE ROCK BAND"

Are we right in thinking you're trying to make all the old peripherals and hardware compatible with the new-generation of consoles and games?
Absolutely, yes. There's two things to talk about there – we're developing a new selection of hardware with Mad Catz, and we're psyched to do that because they've got a long history with Harmonix and *Rock Band*. Working with new stuff allows us to make some important incremental refinements to some of the components [in the hardware]: the tilt sensor, some of the button architecture – we can basically upgrade the guitars and drums from the last gen.

At the same time, we're consistently surprised by how many people tell us that they still have their hardware – the old guitars and drums. As far as we're concerned, that's an investment they've made in the franchise, and we're working as hard as we can to support that investment. It's a very interesting bit of development work; we can do things to help out the compatibility on the software side, but there's a lot of heavy lifting on the first-party side, too. Microsoft and Sony need to do some work to make this possible, too.

It's more complicated on the Xbox One because there's no way for the 360 controllers to talk directly to that console. So we're in the middle of all that right now, and we are doing everything we can to support the legacy controllers. We'll be saying more about that going forward.

ROCK BAND IN NUMBERS

$175 million+
How much MTV paid to acquire Harmonix in 2006

$50
The amount Harmonix reportedly paid Viacom to go independent in 2010

13 million
Total sales in the *Rock Band* franchise

$1 billion+
The amount *Rock Band* has made in sales

275
consecutive weeks that Harmonix provided DLC for the original trilogy

1692
The DLC tracks released

4000+
Playable tracks

230
DLC packs provided

Top 10 Best-Selling Rock Band artists

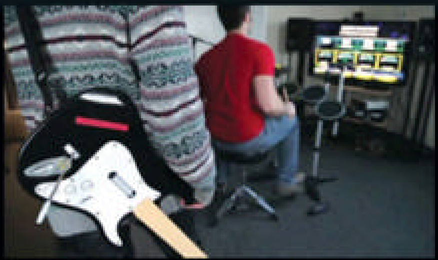
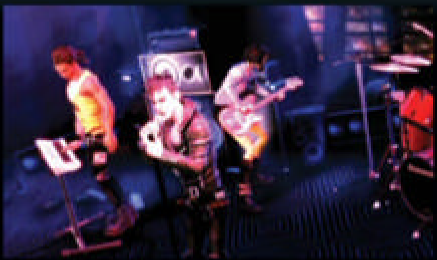
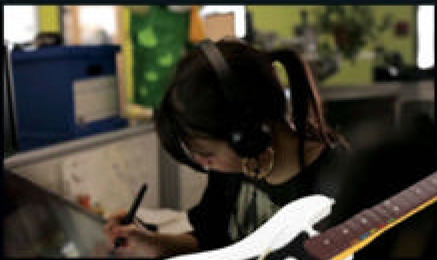
The Beatles (29 songs)
The Who (14 songs)
Metallica (3 songs)
Boston (7 songs)
Disturbed (11 songs)
No Doubt (23 songs)
Foo Fighters (22 songs)
The Police (9 songs)
Red Hot Chili Peppers (18 songs)
Blink 182 (9 songs)

In the time Harmonix has been out of the *Rock Band* market, *Rocksmith* has stepped in and filled a few of the gaps. Did you learn anything from *Rocksmith*'s 'educational' format?
Well, we're pretty proud of the work we did with *Rock Band 3*'s 'Pro' initiative – in retrospect, though, I think that feature would have been better as a standalone product. I have a *ton* of respect for what *Rocksmith* has done, and I feel they're filling a niche that's really valuable in the music games space. When I talk about 'focus' as an approach for us during development… well, a lot of what we did in *Rock Band 3* increased the breadth of play, but that kind of broke up our audience. The common rhetoric of *Rock Band 3* was so broad, and I'm proud of that, but *Rock Band 4* brings the game's emphasis back to what it is about *Rock Band* that is really strong. The game is about four-player band simulation: guitar, bass, drums, vocals. All of our innovations are hitting that core demographic squarely.

So you want to get back to that 'party game' feeling?
Absolutely! What we're trying to do is manufacture fun. I love the idea that some percentage of the people that play *Rock Band* walk away with a greater understanding of music or the relationship between the game and its cultural impact, but at the same time, I think it's more important for us to be honest with ourselves about what we're making – it's a simulation. You *don't* need to know anything about music to play it, you *don't* need to know how to play guitar to be able to have a great time. As we were playing it was one of the things that really stuck out to us; that accessibility is so on point, and we really want to bring that back around.

The studio must love its creative freedom after working under publishers for so long?
Absolutely – where we are now as a bona fide indie studio just gives everyone here so much freedom and passion. You know, we talk about the MTV years… and by the time *Rock Band 3* rolled around, we were a *big* team and had a tight relationship with our marketing department and our retail partners… but that just made it harder to be *agile*, you know? The most interesting thing about our studio size right now is that the space between 'idea' and 'implementation' is incredibly small.

If we come up with ideas, we can get them into playtest straight away and then we can develop. It reminds me, in fact, of the approach we were taking in the early 2000s: there's a ton of trust between every part of Harmonix now, and we're a really lean, agile studio. In fact, I'd say we are in our creative prime right now. The stuff we've been putting out over the last few years is the most aggressively creative work we've ever done, and that makes me feel that now, we've got some muscles to flex. It feels really good.

■ A lot of staff in the studio actually play in live bands, so they have first-hand experience when it comes to communicating that experience to the player.





How Has Dynasty

"I do feel that we have come to the point that we need to change the game drastically." It's not often you hear statements from developers that serve as both dramatic statement *and* unintentional punchline, but that's what *Dynasty Warriors* producer Akihiro Suzuki has just provided. After all, we know the joke by now. *Dynasty Warriors* games are all the same! All you do is bash buttons until you win! Right?

It depends, as these sorts of questions often do, on who you ask. *Dynasty Warriors* fans have often defended the series as fun, strategic and interesting. There's an element of button-bashing but the games are more about map management and learning to prioritise different tasks to succeed. On Chaos difficulty, there's a higher level of play involved that is rarely discussed outside of hardcore fan communities: learning how many frames of invincibility there are on the best moves for a character, safe attack strings, attacks with quick start-up and so on.

Detractors point to the endless churn of *Dynasty Warriors* games through the mainline titles, the *Xtreme Legends* and *Empires* instalments and the spin-offs. The gameplay never changes in any significant way and the constant



Fun. Boring. Safe. Exciting. Bland. Cheesy. Dynasty Warriors is many things to many people as it has also become one of the longest-running series in gaming. How? Producer Akihiro Suzuki spills the secrets…

Warriors Lasted So Long?

stream of releases has diluted the impact and appeal. The next release, *Bladestorm Nightmares*, had a dev cycle of "about a year" according to Suzuki, which highlights how quickly Omega Force can crank these games out. Even the 1 versus 1,000 aspect isn't unique anymore, thanks to the likes of *Dead Rising* and *Kingdom Under Fire*.

But regardless, this is a series that has endured for over 15 years and has seen almost 50 games released under the 'musou' umbrella at developer Omega Force. How has the *Dynasty Warriors* series been going for so long? What has the secret been? Today, we're not asking fans nor detractors. We're asking the producer. And Suzuki feels that it's the familiarity of the series that has been the key to its success.

"We are really grateful for the fans that have supported us throughout this long franchise, so big thanks to them," starts Suzuki. "The reason we feel that this franchise has been going for so long and so well for us is that we haven't changed the core essence, but what we have done is we have made sure that there is always something new for every instalment. It could have been a minor change but we made sure whether it was on the action side, on the character side, or on the story side, we just made sure we are tweaking in the right way so that the next instalment will see the franchise… that it will be something better than the previous instalment."

There's been a slow decline in sales since the days of *Dynasty Warriors* on PlayStation 2, when the series saw releases break the million sales mark, and that's something that has led the studio to tinker with the formula to try and bring those fans back into the fold.

"Obviously looking at the fans, some fans do leave every now and then, that's just a fact," Suzuki continues. "But we try to create something new to »



bring those fans back as well. So again, the core essence and core foundation hasn't changed that much and maybe that's one of the reasons the franchise has done so well. We have the right balance of the core foundation of the game while we're making sure certain areas are enhanced every now and then."

Then comes the admission we weren't quite expecting to hear.

"The *Dynasty Warriors* franchise hasn't changed the core foundation of the game itself, but being a producer, I do feel that we have come to the point that we need to change the game drastically to give it a new boost, in terms of energy. Obviously the core concept of 1 versus 1000, that won't change. The exhilarating feel of 1 versus 1000 action, that won't change



Hyrule Warriors saw Omega Force mash up *Zelda* characters with its traditional 'musou' gameplay, introducing a new audience to its brand of 1 versus 1,000 battling.

> "For the coming Dynasty Warriors franchise titles, we are looking into making major or drastic changes in terms of the gameplay"

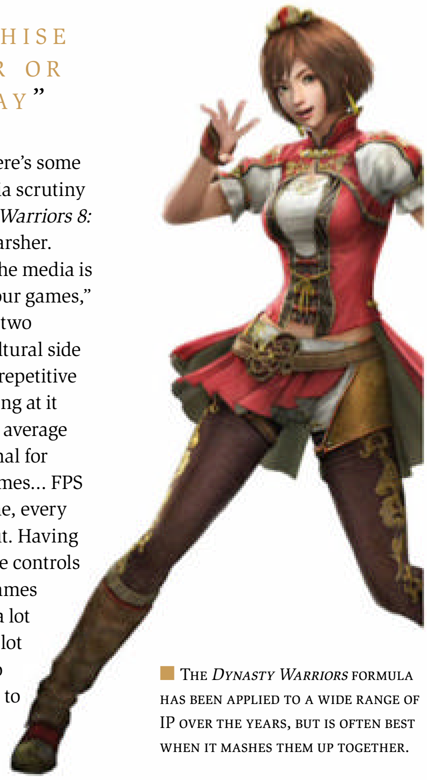
either. But yes, we do feel that we have reached the stage... for the coming *Dynasty Warriors* franchise titles, we are looking into making major or drastic changes in terms of the gameplay to bring new life into the franchise."

Besides the trademark 'musou' gameplay, something else has defined *Dynasty Warriors* since its birth: the huge disparity between what the media think of the series and what the fans think. Although some games have fared better than others, and although sales have remained healthy despite a general decline, *Dynasty Warriors* has never reached any sort of critical acclaim. The most recent outing in the series, *Dynasty Warriors 8: Empires*, scrambled its way to a 70 score on Metacritic and that's the highest score the series has received in *years*. More often it lurks around the 60 range, dragged down by complaints about how all *Dynasty Warriors* games are the same and tired jokes about bashing the buttons until your thumbs gives up.

But Suzuki is keenly aware that there's some truth behind the jibes and while media scrutiny appears to be softening (see *Dynasty Warriors 8: Empires*), fan feedback seems to be harsher.

"Obviously we understand where the media is coming from in terms of criticism of our games," Suzuki explains. "However, there are two aspects to this, we feel – one is the cultural side and one is the action side. Maybe the repetitive gameplay is a negative point but looking at it from the cultural point of view, for an average Japanese games player, it's quite normal for them to say, for example, shooting games... FPS games look the same and feel the same, every time we see a numbered title come out. Having said that, we do feel that looking at the controls and action of the *Dynasty Warriors* games in detail, it does lack depth. We have a lot of characters you can play with and a lot of character variation, but there are so many characters and so many visuals to recreate, the team feels..."

There's a slight pause.



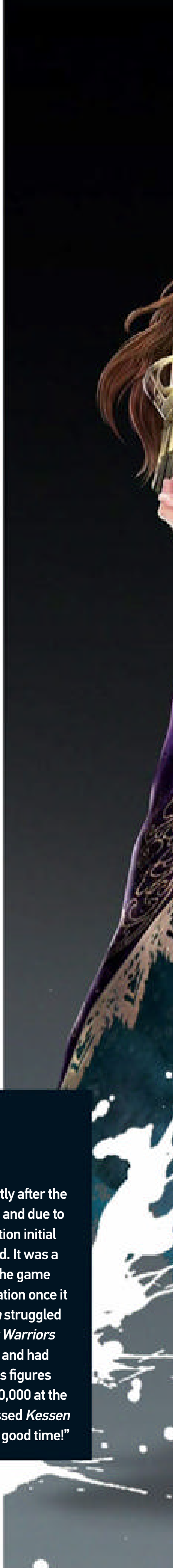
The *Dynasty Warriors* formula has been applied to a wide range of IP over the years, but is often best when it mashes them up together.



THE BIG QUESTION

Whatever happened to Kessen?

Around the same time *Dynasty Warriors 2* created a... well, a gaming dynasty, Koei launched another Asian war series alongside it: *Kessen*. We know which series thrived but it was *Kessen* that was favoured at the time, as Suzuki tells us: "When PS2 came about, there were two major projects running at the time. *Dynasty Warriors 2* and *Kessen*. *Kessen* was supervised by the CEO whereas *Dynasty Warriors* had its own separate line. As *Kessen* was the one under the CEO's order, there was heavier promotion and staffing. At one stage, the CEO said "is *Dynasty Warriors* even that good?" Or words to that effect. So the team was really up for the challenge of beating *Kessen*. *Kessen* was a launch title but *Dynasty Warriors* was delayed slightly after the hardware launch, and due to the lack of promotion initial sales weren't good. It was a slow starter, but the game had a great reputation once it came out. *Kessen* struggled whereas *Dynasty Warriors 2* went really well and had a longer run. Sales figures reached about 400,000 at the time and it surpassed *Kessen* easily. So it was a good time!"





DYNASTY WARRIORS TIMELINE

(Japanese release dates)

- **DYNASTY WARRIORS** February 1997
- **DYNASTY WARRIORS 2** August 2000
- **DYNASTY WARRIORS 3** September 2001
- **DYNASTY WARRIORS 3: XTREME LEGENDS** January 2003
- **DYNASTY WARRIORS 4** February 2003
- **DYNASTY WARRIORS 4: XTREME LEGENDS** November 2003
- **SAMURAI WARRIORS** February 2004
- **DYNASTY WARRIORS 4: EMPIRES** August 2004
- **SAMURAI WARRIORS: XTREME LEGENDS** November 2004
- **DYNASTY WARRIORS 5** February 2005
- **DYNASTY WARRIORS ADVANCE** March 2005
- **DYNASTY WARRIORS 4: HYPER** April 2005
- **DYNASTY WARRIORS 5: XTREME LEGENDS** September 2005
- **SAMURAI WARRIORS: STATE OF WAR** December 2005
- **SAMURAI WARRIORS 2** February 2006
- **DYNASTY WARRIORS VOL. 2** March 2006
- **DYNASTY WARRIORS 5: EMPIRES** March 2006
- **DYNASTY WARRIORS ONLINE** April 2006
- **SAMURAI WARRIORS 2 EMPIRES** November 2006
- **SAMURAI WARRIORS 2: XTREME LEGENDS** August 2007
- **DYNASTY WARRIORS 6** November 2007
- **WARRIORS OROCHI** March 2007
- **DYNASTY WARRIORS: GUNDAM** March 2007
- **DYNASTY WARRIORS DS: FIGHTERS' BATTLE** April 2007
- **BLADESTORM: THE HUNDRED YEARS' WAR** August 2007
- **WARRIORS OROCHI 2** April 2008
- **DYNASTY WARRIORS 6: SPECIAL** October 2008
- **DYNASTY WARRIORS: GUNDAM 2** December 2008
- **DYNASTY WARRIORS: STRIKEFORCE** February 2009
- **DYNASTY WARRIORS 6: EMPIRES** May 2009
- **SAMURAI WARRIORS 3** December 2009
- **FIST OF THE NORTH STAR: KEN'S RAGE** March 2010
- **DYNASTY WARRIORS: GUNDAM 3** December 2010
- **DYNASTY WARRIORS 7** March 2011
- **DYNASTY WARRIORS 7: XTREME LEGENDS** September 2011
- **DYNASTY WARRIORS NEXT** December 2011
- **WARRIORS: LEGENDS OF TROY** May 2011
- **SAMURAI WARRIORS 3: XTREME LEGENDS** February 2011
- **SAMURAI WARRIORS 3: EMPIRES** August 2011
- **WARRIORS OROCHI 3** December 2011
- **SAMURAI WARRIORS 3 Z: SPECIAL** February 2012
- **DYNASTY WARRIORS 7: EMPIRES** November 2012
- **FIST OF THE NORTH STAR: KEN'S RAGE 2** December 2012
- **DYNASTY WARRIORS 8** February 2013
- **DYNASTY WARRIORS 8: XTREME LEGENDS** November 2013
- **DYNASTY WARRIORS: GUNDAM REBORN** December 2013
- **DYNASTY WARRIORS 8: EMPIRES** November 2014
- **HYRULE WARRIORS** August 2014
- **BLADESTORM: NIGHTMARE** March 2015





"Do not pursue Lu Bu!" has become a catchphrase of the series, referencing the overpowered character often slotted in as a villain, particularly in the earlier games.

"They haven't *neglected* it but in terms of the pure volume required, they haven't been able to fine tune all the individual actions of those characters. So the lack of depth, in terms of the actions that the players can do in those games is definitely one of the points that the team knows requires a crucial fix. So as we said, we are looking into drastically changing the gameplay of the franchise. So that's one area we're looking into and hopefully we'll be able to achieve the right balance in terms of providing the right gameplay, not just for this next-gen cycle but for the overall experience as well."

It's not just Western audiences who are making their opinions known either, as Japanese fans also share the same worries with regards to the *Dynasty Warriors* gameplay.

"Looking at the feedback from Japan and Asian customer surveys, the fans are voicing concerns over the lack of depth in terms of the action side of the gameplay," Suzuki tells us. "That's one area we often hear. Having said that, looking at this from the cultural side again, we feel the Japanese and Asian audiences are much more familiar with what the games are about in terms of the plot and the storyline of the *Dynasty Warriors* series, *Romance Of The Three Kingdoms* for example. So every time we bring out a new character for the franchise, people understand, to a certain extent, what the character is about and what that character is associated with. So there's a cultural background in terms of the differences between the West and East and what they know about history in general. So again, it's a difficult thing in terms of the cultural differences and the education of the Western and Eastern audiences. In terms of the feedback, the action side is similar but the cultural backgrounds are different."

Having had fans for so long brings in a new problem altogether – fan expectations. When Omega Force makes *Dynasty Warriors*, it's criticised for making the same game over and »

over again. When they try and make something new, as they have done with *Bladestorm Nightmare* - "it's more a troop action-strategy game, so it's totally different gameplay in terms of what you're required to do," explains Suzuki – fans complain because it's not what they expected. It's a tricky catch-22.

"There were a lot of players who bought *Bladestorm* who used to play the *Dynasty Warriors* to start with and there was a lot of feedback from fans that they felt that it was really different to the *Dynasty Warriors* games," recalls Suzuki. "Actually there were some complaints that it *wasn't* a *Dynasty Warriors* game. But it wasn't supposed to be a *Dynasty Warriors* game! So maybe it was the way it was brought to the market that didn't quite work out in terms of the message we were trying to get across. So a lot of *Dynasty Warriors* fans bought *Bladestorm* but at the same time, the message didn't get across that it was supposed to be something different. We feel that in terms of the franchise and the gameplay that is associated with the franchise, we feel that it's now established, so I think people know *Bladestorm* is different in terms of what the gameplay provides and the experience. We feel that unlike the previous *Bladestorm* game, we are sending out the correct message to the correct audience."





One Piece: Pirate Warriors is one of the more successful spin-offs in the Omega Force back catalogue, the light anime proving a perfect match for the gameplay.

> "The lack of depth, in terms of the actions that the players can do in our games, is definitely one of the points that the team knows requires a crucial fix"

How *Bladestorm Nightmares* is received by fans is yet to be seen and it'll be an interesting case study for Omega Force, given it is following on eight years after its predecessor rolled out on Xbox 360 and PS3 as a mild and mostly inoffensive curio. But regardless, we're now at the point where the series needs to change drastically. We've been here before, of course – *Dynasty Warriors* actually started life as a 1-vs-1 fighting before fresh PS2 hardware specs and a declining Japanese fighting games market convinced the team to switch to its now trademark open battlefield gameplay for *Dynasty Warriors 2*. Can we expect something that dramatic again?

Suzuki laughs to himself and pauses for thought, as though he's hesitant to commit himself to promising something too big.

"The team is looking into different options and variations but as we mentioned previously, the concept of the game, of 1 vs 1000, that shouldn't change. We also don't plan to change the historical plot of the game itself. So those will be kept the same. But we are weighing up the different options that we could take in terms of the gameplay itself. We don't have anything to share at this point obviously, but we'll bring out such information in the future."

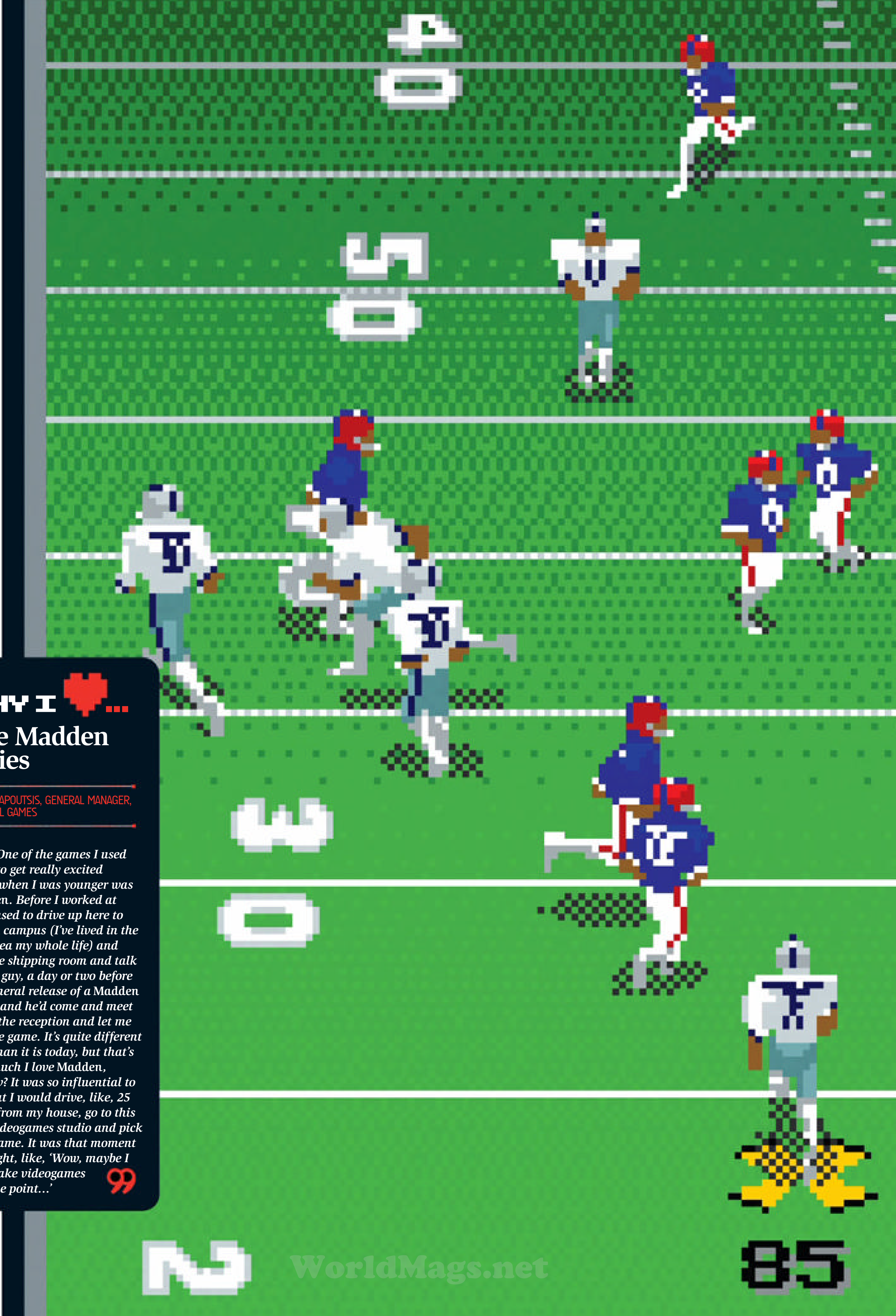


THE BIG QUESTION

Why the squealing guitar rock?

It's become one of the hallmarks of *Dynasty Warriors*. You'll charge forward, see the first enemies on the horizon and then rock music crashes in straight from the Eighties, playing hair-raising guitar solos as you charge into battle. How is the music recorded? Is there one man at Omega Force who plays endless guitar riffs and you just record him every now and then? Suzuki bellows with laughter when he hears the question: "Very interesting question! Obviously we do record it properly. It's been recorded based on a concept we have for the game and we get the artists and composers to come up with the tunes every time. It's suited more for the Japanese audience in that sense and maybe that's why Western audiences feel it isn't the right music to use. If it sounds that bad for the Western audience, do let us know! Some people like it, some don't. We get a lot of feedback from Western audiences and they don't really like the music. That's an area the team will look into for future games. Perhaps the end result isn't as suitable for the Western audience as it is for the Japanese audience."



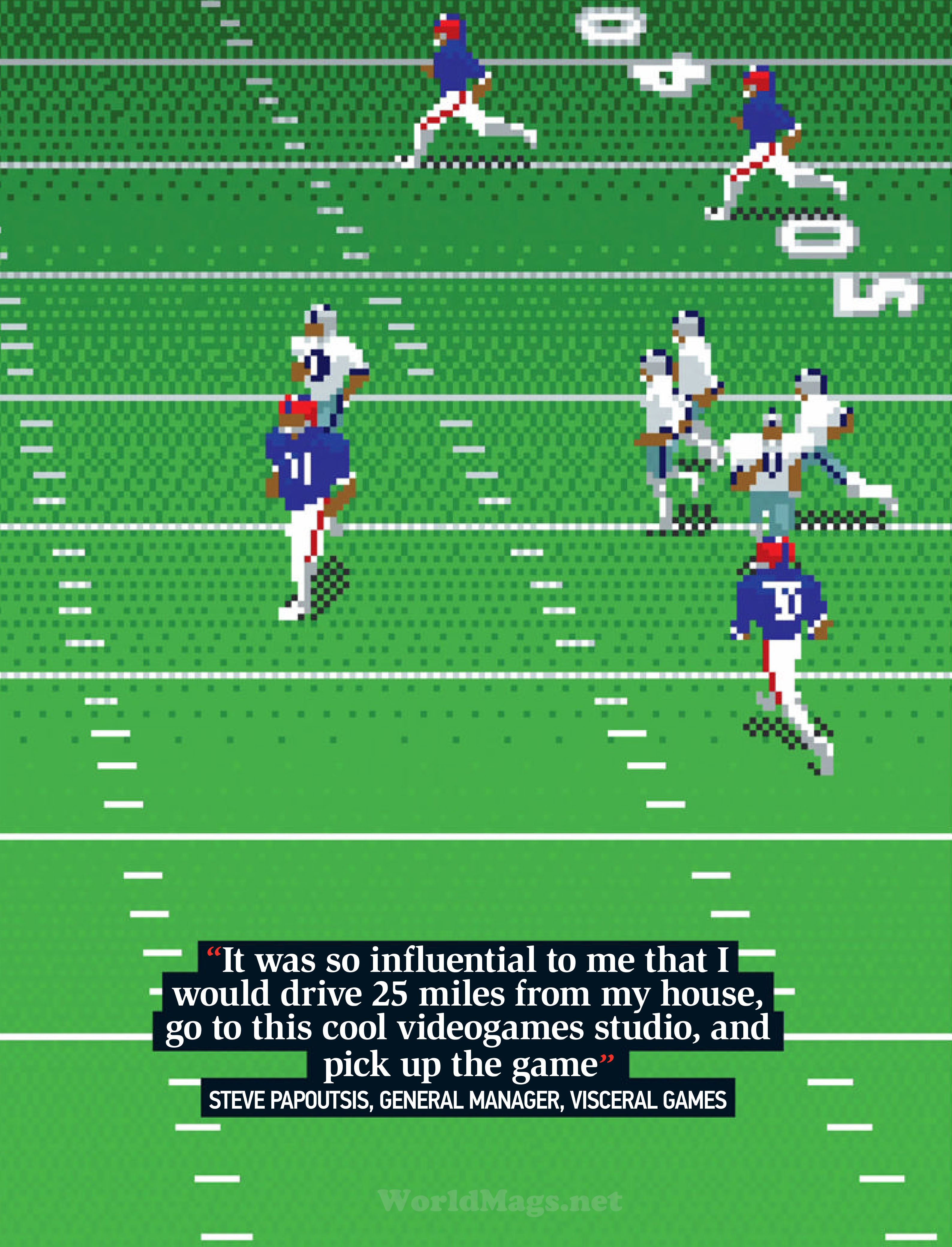


WHY I ♥...

The Madden series

STEVE PAPOUTSIS, GENERAL MANAGER, VISCERAL GAMES

"One of the games I used to get really excited about when I was younger was Madden. *Before I worked at EA, I used to drive up here to the EA campus (I've lived in the Bay area my whole life) and call the shipping room and talk to this guy, a day or two before the general release of a* Madden *game, and he'd come and meet me at the reception and let me buy the game. It's quite different then than it is today, but that's how much I love* Madden, *y'know? It was so influential to me that I would drive, like, 25 miles from my house, go to this cool videogames studio and pick up a game. It was that moment I thought, like, 'Wow, maybe I can make videogames at some point…'"*



“It was so influential to me that I would drive 25 miles from my house, go to this cool videogames studio, and pick up the game”

STEVE PAPOUTSIS, GENERAL MANAGER, VISCERAL GAMES

EVERY ISSUE PACKED WITH...

- The biggest exclusives and industry access
- In-depth features on the most important issues in gaming
- Reviews you can trust from industry experts
- Dedicated retro content

WHY YOU SHOULD SUBSCRIBE...

- **Save 30%** off the cover price – **just £10.50 every 3 issues** on Direct Debit
- **FREE delivery** direct to your door
- **Never miss an issue**

ORDER BY

30 APRIL

Use code **PQ15** for this offer.

BY POST

Send your completed form to:
games™ Subscriptions, 800 Guillat Avenue,
Kent Science Park, Sittingbourne, Kent ME9 8GU

YOUR DETAILS

Title________ First name____________________

Surname____________________

Address____________________

____

____

Postcode____________ Country____________

Telephone number____________________

Mobile number____________________

Email address____________________

DIRECT DEBIT PAYMENT

☐ UK Direct Debit Payment

I will pay just £10.50 every 3 issues (Save 30%)

Instruction to your Bank or Building Society to pay by Direct Debit

Please fill in the form and send it to: Imagine Publishing Limited, 800 Guillat Avenue, Kent Science Park, Sittingbourne, Kent, ME9 8GU

Name and full postal address of your Bank or Building Society

To: The Manager ____________ Bank/Building Society

Address

Postcode

Name(s) of account holder(s)

Branch sort code

Bank/Building Society account number

Originator's Identification Number

5 0 1 8 8 4

Reference Number

Instructions to your Bank or Building Society
Please pay Imagine Publishing Limited Direct Debits from the account detailed in this instruction subject to the safeguards assured by the Direct Debit guarantee. I understand that this instruction may remain with Imagine Publishing Limited and, if so, details will be passed on electronically to my Bank/Building Society

Signature(s)

Date

Banks and Building Societies may not accept Direct Debit instructions for some types of account

A6 instruction form

PAYMENT DETAILS

YOUR EXCLUSIVE READER PRICE, 1 YEAR (13 ISSUES)

☐ UK £52 (Save 20%) ☐ Europe – £70 ☐ World – £80 ☐ USA – £80

Cheque

☐ I enclose a cheque for £____________
(made payable to Imagine Publishing Ltd)

Credit/Debit Card

☐ Visa ☐ Mastercard ☐ Amex ☐ Maestro

Card number

Expiry date

Issue number ☐☐ (if Maestro)

Signed ____________________

Date ____________________

Please tick if you do not wish to receive any promotional material from Imagine Publishing Ltd by post ☐
by telephone ☐ via email ☐

Please tick if you do not wish to receive any promotional material from other companies by post ☐
by telephone ☐ Please tick if you DO wish to receive such information via email ☐

TERMS & CONDITIONS

Terms and Conditions: This offer entitles new UK direct debit subscribers to pay only £10.50 every 3 issues. New subscriptions will start from the next available issue. Offer code PQ15 must be quoted to receive this special subscription price. Details of the Direct Debit Guarantee are available on request. This offer expires 30TH April 2015 . Imagine Publishing reserves the right to limit this type of offer to one per household. Subscribers can cancel this subscription at any time.

Reviews



84

RESIDENT EVIL REVELATIONS 2

Has Capcom's experiment with episodic gaming finally delivered the innovative *Resi* we've been waiting for?



THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.













AGREE/DISAGREE?

games™ is always right. But that doesn't stop some people disagreeing. Think we've got a review horribly wrong? Or did we nail it?

Let us know through the following channels:

facebook.com/gamesTM

@gamesTMmag
#gamestmiswrong #gamestmisright

gplus.to/gamesTMmagazine



NOPE, IT'S DEFINITELY NOT CHRIS'S BLOOD

Resident Evil Revelations 2 Episodes 1-4

Above: *Revelations 2* is another example of Capcom showcasing all it has learned over the years of crafting survival horror experiences. It just turns out that a lot of what it has learned is things we've seen a dozen times before.

Capcom has genuinely been listening to fans of the *Resident Evil* series for years now, but it hasn't been until *Resident Evil Revelations 2* that this has become startlingly apparent. The obvious additions like an ability to actually move – strafing, crouching and so on – have been around a few years now, the inclusion of cult favourite Barry Burton as a main character is a great nod to fans, and the constant, wilful silliness of the game and its references are testament to a game that's been made with far more of a self-referential spin than any other previous *Resi* title. Best of all, this fan service mostly works.

Following the story of Claire Redfield and Moira Burton – Barry's daughter – who have been kidnapped and forced to try and survive on a remote island full of… well, nasty former people in one half, *Revelations 2* also puts players in the shoes of Burton Snr and a mysterious young girl, Natalia in a six-month-later timeline covering many of the same areas. This is, in turn, split up between four separate episodes – each can be bought independently of the others, but we see little reason why anyone would. But that's neither here nor there.

This double-duo team dynamic is core to *Revelations 2*'s appeal – Claire and Barry carry guns and are tough, to differing degrees, while Moira and Natalia don't carry firearms – just a crowbar and a brick, respectively. While this could easily degenerate into endlessly having to save your useless partner, each of the non-gun-wielding partners has their own skills that are absolutely necessary in order to survive this particular horror.

Moira carries with her a flashlight, capable of both discovering hidden items and – when trained on the eyes of an enemy – able to blind them, leaving them open for Claire to get in a free attack. Natalia's brick, meanwhile, is a basic stun/smash lock item, with her main talent being pointing – which becomes seriously useful as of the second episode – and the ability, like in *The Last of Us*, to sense enemies before you are able to see them. Along similar lines, Moira's crowbar is also

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC, PS3, Xbox 360
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Capcom
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £19.99 (or £4.99 per episode)
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

THIS IS THE FIRST TIME WE'VE EVER LAUGHED AT A RESI GAME AND FELT LIKE WE WERE MEANT TO





Below: You may be nimble in combat, able to strafe, dodge and sprint with the best of them, but your enemies are often just as nimble as you – with the added bonus of being able to duck and dodge while running towards you.

FAQs

Q. HOW LONG IS IT?
Four episodes of varying length, each with two stories to play through – roughly 12 hours in total.

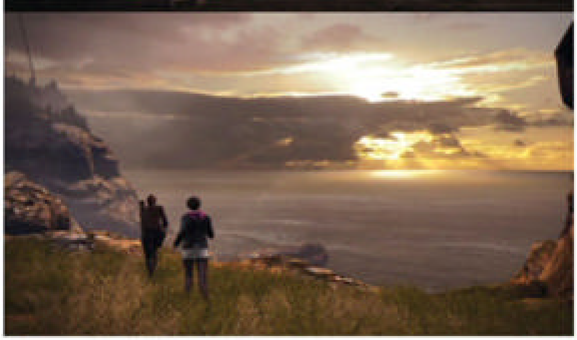
Q. MULTIPLAYER OR AI?
Multiplayer is the way to play if you can, but the AI works. It's not *Resi 5*-era terrible, at least.

Q. BARRY BURTON?
Barry! We'll ignore the Game Boy title you could play as him in – this is the first time Bazza's had a proper role for the player. Wonderful.

Below: Working together with your partner is key – when the AI does this job, it works… just about. When you're with another player, though, things are much more in keeping with how they should be.







the only thing that can open certain doors and item crates, while Natalia's 'small hands' can open certain boxes Barry's meaty man-hands cannot. Each partner is absolutely necessary – far more than just a side attraction and something we're surprised to be saying will be genuinely tempting for some people to play as in co-operative mode.

It's all very well balanced, and unlike in other games where working as a team seems like an optional thing, in *Revelations 2* it is absolutely necessary to make any progress. This is partly down to the symbiotic relationship between each duo, but also because – thankfully – *Revelations 2* provides quite the challenge at times. It's not on *Resident Evil 4*'s level of panic-inducement when it comes to the inevitable 'tons of enemies swarming you' events, but after your second or third outright failure in these sections you'll begin to realise that you really do need to think, as well as pay attention to your item stocks. Yes, we once again have a *Resident Evil* that's stingy with its supplies – and once again it works in the game's favour.

As you progress through *Revelations 2*'s episodes you will begin to feel a slight sense of trudgery, it has to be said. While many elements are refined and improved on *Resi*'s past, this is still a specific formula we've seen many times in the past – and not just from this series. It's in that respect that the peculiar episodic structure does actually help, as the game is forcefully broken up into chunks you can take on at your leisure. Still, it's not a giant leap forward for the series, even if it does show off some great progress from Capcom's near two decade old franchise.

One area that can't help but raise a smile – for more than one reason – is the story. While the overarching narrative is pretty straightforward, with the aforementioned differing timelines of each duo's adventures adding a little of interest, this is the first time we've ever laughed at a *Resident Evil* game and felt like we were *meant* to. Callbacks aplenty, wilful silliness and even, would you believe it, *jokes* (Claire works for Terrasave – "because 'terr' doesn't always have to end with 'orist'"). It feels like Capcom, rather than making schlocky, silly horror stories by accident has actually gone and done it by design this time. Though admittedly we don't remember punching any boulders in *Revelations 2*.

We really can't see fans of the series being let down in any real way by *Revelations 2* – it's good fun, has some genuinely intense sequences, plays with its own history in a pleasing fashion and doesn't outstay its welcome. Newcomers might be confused when it comes to certain series hallmarks and archaic design elements that those in the know take for granted, but it's definitely one of the friendliest introductions to the series a non-*Resi* player could have. Even if it does, as said, get quite a bit more difficult as of the second episode.

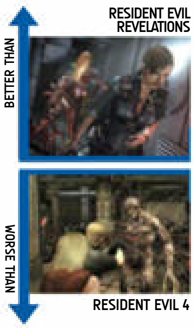
But there is an overall feeling of 'Okay, what's next?' when it's over. *Revelations 2* won't stick with you for long, barring its extra minigames, and while it encourages speedruns and searching out hidden items, there isn't much to draw most players back in once it's finished. It's absolutely on the right track and gives us great hopes for Resident Evil 7, but what we have here, right now, in *Resident Evil Revelations 2*, is merely a pretty decent game. Which, to be fair, is better than some might have expected.

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

CONTROL YOU: *Resident Evil*s of the past are dead; long live the new *Resident Evil*s. You can strafe, crouch, stealth kill, sprint and more – the tank controls are well and truly dead.

EXTRA, EXTRA!

There are bountiful extras to be found in *Revelations 2* once you're done with the main campaign. A lot of them – cosmetic changes, weapons and so on – are paid-for DLC, but those picking up the full season digitally do get a few extra missions and modes to muck about in. Easily the best extra is the RPG-like Raid mode – the natural evolution of the much-loved Mercenaries mode from *Resi*'s past. It's a solid extra on top of a solid game. One question we do have right now though: will all the content be included on-disc with the boxed release?



VERDICT 7/10
WHILE NOT QUITE THERE, *RESI*'S BACK ON TRACK

CHRONICLES OF EUPHORIA

Xenoblade Chronicles 3D

Below: Scattered across the map are a number of 'heart-to-heart' icons. When encountered with the right party members with strong enough affinity, these trigger special cutscenes that reveal more about the heroes' relationships.



DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Monster Games
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: 2 April
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Barely anything has been compromised in Xenoblade Chronicles' journey to handheld. Xenoblade Chronicles didn't quite enjoy the enormous success many believed it deserved on Wii. Despite improving the RPG genre in numerous ways and offering arguably the finest role-playing adventure of its generation, lukewarm sales meant Monolith Soft's gem instead had to settle for cult status. Nintendo is no doubt hopeful, then, that this 3DS port of the game will attract a new audience of gamers who missed it the first time around. Thankfully, they'll get the full experience too.

For the uninitiated, the game tells the story of Shulk, an 18-year-old living in a world set atop the ancient remains of two enormous giants. When the mechanical life forms that reside on one half of the world invade Shulk's half, he grabs the mythical Monado sword and teams up with his friends to stop the invasion.

What makes the game such a joy to play isn't its plot however, but the way it completely rewrites the RPG rule book, flat out refusing to conform to the typical gameplay tropes and standards set by countless other games in the genre. The irritating aspects of many RPGs – random encounters, fetch quests, forgettable NPCs – are often accepted with a sigh and "that's just the way it is", but *Xenoblade* instead questions why this is so and offers alternatives which are frequently better than the status quo.

The NPCs dotted around the world map are not generic quest and chat providers, but form the game's interesting Affinity Chart feature, where the more you gain each character's trust the more you find out about them and their relationships with certain other NPCs. Over time, you'll end up creating a massive chart connecting everyone in the game, lending the world a sense of personality rarely found in the genre.

Meanwhile, while fetch quests are indeed still present, players no longer have to travel all the way across the game's massive map to deliver the goods: once located and collected, the quest is automatically completed. Random encounters are mainly in the hands of the player too: creatures freely roam the environment and often the player either

FOR THOSE PUTTING OFF BUYING A NEW 3DS UNTIL THE RELEASE OF A MUST-HAVE TITLE, THAT TIME MAY HAVE COME

chooses whether to engage, or can avoid battle simply by staying out of eyesight.

Battles themselves are fast-paced real-time affairs, with your party members automatically dishing out basic attacks while special attacks (called Arts) build up and can then be triggered at will. Being able to freely run around the combat arena, avoiding enemy attacks and dishing out commands to your CPU-controlled teammates gives a refreshing feeling of dynamism to fights, leading to the unthinkable: a game that actually makes you want to grind because battling is such good fun.

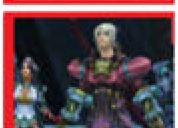
And if it all goes wrong and an enemy gets the better of you, you aren't stripped of your money or your items or anything similarly frustrating that makes you think twice about taking on the challenge again. You're simply sent to the nearest major landmark on the map, fully powered-up and ready to go again. This is a game that celebrates gung-ho bravery, rather than punishing it.

BETTER THAN

MONSTER HUNTER 4 ULTIMATE



AS GOOD AS



XENOBLADE CHRONICLES WII

The happy accident that comes as a result of this streamlined, slog-reduced gameplay is that *Xenoblade Chronicles* is not just a great console game but also perfectly suited for handheld gaming. Players can get a lot of action out of a 20-minute session on the bus, and the Story Memo feature, activated by pressing the R button while the menu is up, reminds you what's going on so you don't suffer that all too common RPG nightmare of loading up a game save after a little time away and completely forgetting what you were supposed to do next.

The port itself is as good as could be expected given the 3DS's lack of power compared to the Wii. Indeed, this is the first game that is only playable on the New 3DS hardware, its improved CPU speed providing the extra horsepower needed to handle







A MODEL EXAMPLE

New to the 3DS version is Collection mode, which lets you unlock character models and music from the game. You do this by spending tokens: one token gets you a random selection, whereas spending three will guarantee you get one you don't already have. Tokens can be earned in three ways: either by spending Play Coins earned by walking with the system (at a price of five Play Coins per token), by StreetPassing other players with the game, or by using the Shulk amiibo figure. To ensure those with hundreds of amassed Play Coins don't rinse Collection mode dry right away, the models and music tracks you can win are progressively unlocked as you play through the game's main story.

FAQs

Q. HOW'S THE MUSIC?
Incredible. Pop headphones in and the orchestral music is amazing… until the characters talk over it.

Q. WHAT ABOUT STANDARD 3DS?
Sorry, this is New 3DS only. Nintendo will be selling the game in a snazzy black box to avoid confusion.

Q. DOES IT SUPPORT AMIIBO?
Only the Shulk one, which is frustrating because it's incredibly rare. It doesn't do much though (see 'A Model Example' to the left).



Left: The textures may tend to be low-res but there's no denying the landscapes still look positively breathtaking at times.

Above: Although it's an impressive port of the Wii game, the texture quality is visibly low-res at times. This isn't a big problem, however: the smaller size of the 3DS screen (particularly the non-XL model) means this is barely noticeable.

the port. Handled by Monster Games (the same studio responsible for the 3DS port of Wii title *Donkey Kong Country Returns*), the differences between the console and handheld versions are only really noticeable when you sit the two side-by-side, and even then the 3DS port only suffers from slightly reduced texture quality. To all intents and purposes, this is pretty much the Wii game on a handheld, running just as smoothly and featuring almost everything that the console version does.

We say 'almost' because there's a single element missing in the 3DS version that may upset some fans of the game. Presumably for storage purposes, the option to play the game with its original Japanese language track has been removed, leaving players with only the English language dialogue instead. We can easily see how this could be an irritation to some as the English dub is notoriously shonky, with characters' *The Only Way Is Chelsea* accents and cringeworthy battle quips ("Man, what a bunch of jokers") already the target of numerous internet memes following the Wii version's release.

This relatively minor annoyance aside, everything else about *Xenoblade Chronicles 3D* remains as incredible as when it originally came to the Wii. A few years on it still remains one of the finest RPGs money can buy, and the move to handheld only serves to further highlight the way its fast-paced gameplay breathes new life into a flatlining genre. For anyone who had been putting off upgrading their 3DS hardware until the release of an essential New 3DS-only title would make it a necessity, that time may have come much sooner than you thought.

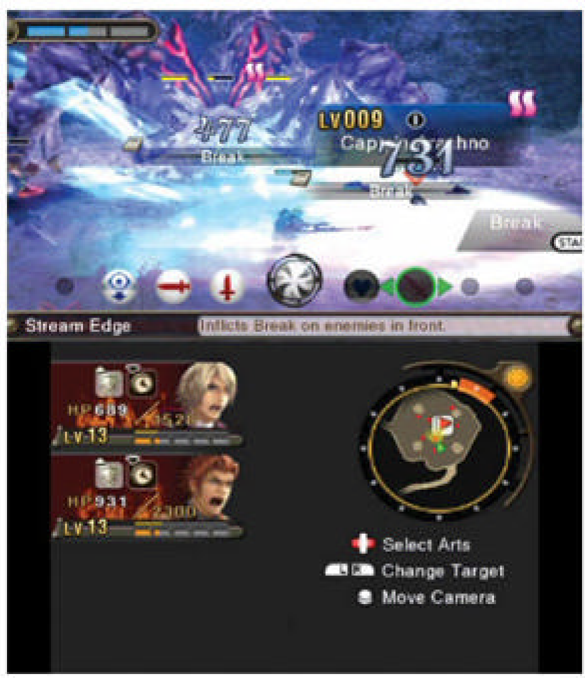
MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

THE 3D: Despite being part of the title, *Xenoblade*'s 3D is underwhelming, and only really noticeable when subtitles and icons float above the action. Given the New 3DS's improved 3D, this is a shame.

VERDICT 9/10

THE FIRST MAJOR REASON TO OWN A NEW 3DS



Above: While the Circle Pad controls your character, special combat attacks can be selected on the fly mid-battle using the D-Pad.

LOOKS WILL ONLY GET YOU SO FAR...

The Order: 1886

A shattered promise is worse than no promise at all. *The Order: 1886*'s near-complete lack of intrigue, energy and entertainment is an act of emotional sabotage in the face of its pre-release hype and guarantees. What was billed as an evolution of narrative complexity and delivery within the videogame space has revealed itself to be little more than a blueprint on how to get everything from character development to basic interaction wrong. A palpable, sour, distasteful disconnect exists between the promotional gusto underpinning this project and its eventually realised form.

Where there was supposed to be the breaking of new ground is a stretch of turf so well-trodden that it contains no definition whatsoever, a flat, monochromatic space so predictable that it immediately feels more caricature than serious. If you've been playing games with any kind of regularity over the past decade then you will have already seen everything *The Order* has to offer. What's more, you'll have already experienced it to a higher quality. A tired, awkwardly-paced and awfully-written campaign is held feebly aloft by a scaffold of quick-time events, aimless (and enforced) swooning over graphical fidelity and shooting gallery sequences of distinct mediocrity. More often than not this is a game that feels like a vanity project, an exercise in stuffing every last pixel and polygon into every hair of drearily rendered moustache. Such a focus on extraneous makeup is simply inexcusable in the face of such limp game design.

DETAILS

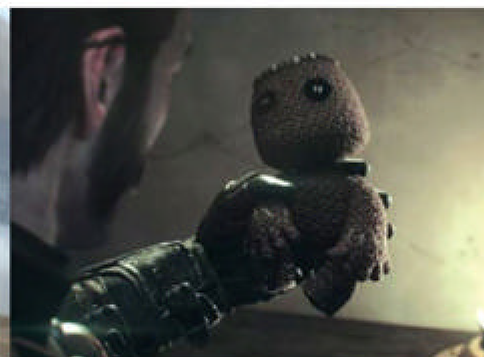
FORMAT: PS4
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Sony
DEVELOPER: Ready At Dawn
PRICE: £54.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Right: Our hero, Galahad, a man of honour and reputation, of moustache and mutton chops. If only being him was as enjoyable as the *idea* of being him.



Above: In this sequence you must look at the apple until Galahad holds it at the exact angle required to trigger a button prompt, at which point he throws it as a distraction. That isn't a joke, you really do have to look over an apple until the angle is perfect...







You play as Galahad, a knight of The Order and a strong-minded individual intent on seeking out the truth despite his peers' reluctance to act out of turn. As he romps his way around an alternate, steampunk-inspired vision of Victorian London he uncovers the supposedly secret realities responsible for an increasingly powerful peasant rebellion and a string of mysterious murders.

Only, it's not a secret at all. Given the clumsy writing and direction, the vast bulk of mystery can be laid bare with marginal cerebral activity within the first few of the included 16 chapters. For a game aimed at adults, the plot, dialogue and personalities on show are patronising to say the least. If the only book you've ever read is *Where's Wally?*, there's a chance you might be impressed by the storytelling. Otherwise, set your expectations to zero.

Question marks over the leading characters' believability within their realm are raised consistently and from the off. Galahad, accompanied by Lafayette, a French knight so clichéd you can't help but envision the Tricolore underwear he must be sporting, must embark on a mission to quietly infiltrate the slum-like Whitechapel area thought to be the epicentre of the rebellion. Immediately you're suspicious of the pair's suitability for the job. Instead of carefully traversing a set of wooden planks pinned across a passage leading to the district, Lafayette simply crashes through them, shoulder first. He's proud of his accomplishment, whereas the player can't help but think he's an idiot for doing such a thing

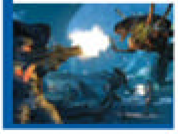
Right: On a technical level, the visual quality is undeniable. Characters move believably and skylines look suitably dramatic, which makes the inferior writing and actions that bit more difficult to swallow.

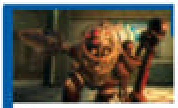
IF YOU'VE BEEN PLAYING GAMES WITH ANY KIND OF REGULARITY OVER THE PAST DECADE THEN YOU WILL HAVE ALREADY SEEN EVERYTHING THE ORDER HAS TO OFFER



ALIENS COLONIAL MARINES

BETTER THAN





WORSE THAN

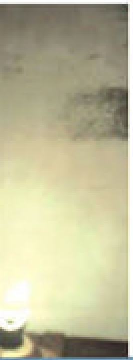
BIOSHOCK

FAQs

Q. ANY FORM OF MULTIPLAYER?
No. All development efforts have gone into making *The Order: 1886* a polished single-player experience.

Q. IS IT AN 'ADULT' EXPERIENCE?
In terms of blood, nudity and language: yes. In terms of narrative intelligence: no.

Q. WILL IT APPEAL TO CALL OF DUTY FANS?
This is a completely different kind of shooter, a story-driven affair with ambitions to be closer to the likes of *BioShock* and *Metro 2033*.



A KNIGHT'S ARSENAL

The available weapons range from standard shotguns and sub-machine guns to more extravagant devices designed and produced by *The Order*'s imagining of Nikola Tesla, acting here as Q from *James Bond*. Tesla's inventions range from a gun that can shoot branches of electricity and zap multiple targets to one that fires gas clouds into enemy positions and subsequently ignites them. Interesting they are, well-implemented they are not. As with the rest of the game, you're limited so severely that only a few moments arise in which you can legitimately puts such devices to good use. The result is that you feel teased, shown something interesting only to have it snatched away again.



on a shut-up-and-stay-in-the-shadows mission. Minutes later, after dealing with a grunt that failed to notice your deafening home improvements, the bumbling buddies try to blend into a crowd gathered to listen to a rousing speech on the corruption of London's ruling classes. The knights are spotted, to their surprise, and make a hasty getaway. Seemingly, they've neglected to realise that their gaudy, expensive clothes couldn't possibly stand out any more obviously amongst the poverty stricken masses.

We're told that these are great men, heroes of their time and champions of their environment. Clearly, they're not. The overarching idea of a Victorian London beset by fantastical problems is an interesting one, but the lens through which you see the tale is so amateurishly constructed that you can only laugh at the action as it stumbles drunkenly around in front of you.

Even worse is that you're given no freedom to even temporarily remove yourself from the tedium. Cutscene rolls into quick-time event, which rolls into cutscene and into shooting and back again. Sprinkled across this predictable formula are some of the most ill-conceived moments of enforced stealth you're ever likely to experience and mini-games (lock-picking, circuit overloading) that, like everything else, favour visuals over quality of interaction.

The design presents you with such a narrow beam of focus that you never once slip into character as Galahad and believe that you're a knight on a quest for truth and justice. Instead, you're dragged through proceedings and told what to do, what to look at, what to feel. This would be perfectly acceptable rollercoaster if the writing, acting and directing were on a par with even the most questionable of Michael Bay offerings, but it's simply not.

The Order clearly sees itself as some sort of bridge between the world of games and cinema, but it fails miserably to create the essence, tones or rewards offered by either medium. Its only saving grace is that it offers so little by way of new ideas that you feel immediately safe in the knowledge that it's not going to suddenly ask you to do something that you've not done hundreds of times before. You don't need to worry about how to play or what to do, you can simply slump into a mild coma and have at it.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

THE AWFUL STORY: The writing is terrible, despite developer claims of heightened storytelling and narrative intrigue. For *The Order* to fail to provide a decent script is, for this type of game, unforgivable.

Other than that, it looks technical impressively. On an art design level it could better frame its world, but the graphical output does admittedly do a fine job of demonstrating what this hardware is capable of. The likelihood, given the relative youth of the PS4, is that things are only going to get better. If nothing else, then, *The Order: 1886* makes us excited for the kinds of visuals we can expect in the future from other, better games. That's something, at least.

VERDICT 3/10
A CASE OF EXTREME HYPE AND ZERO REWARD

MORE ACORN THAN OAK

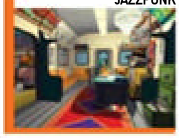
Grow Home

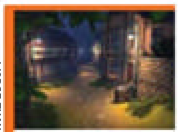
DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Ubisoft Reflections
PRICE: £5.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Intel Core Duo 2.5 GHz, 2GB RAM, 1GB GPU, 1GB HDD Space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

JAZZPUNK





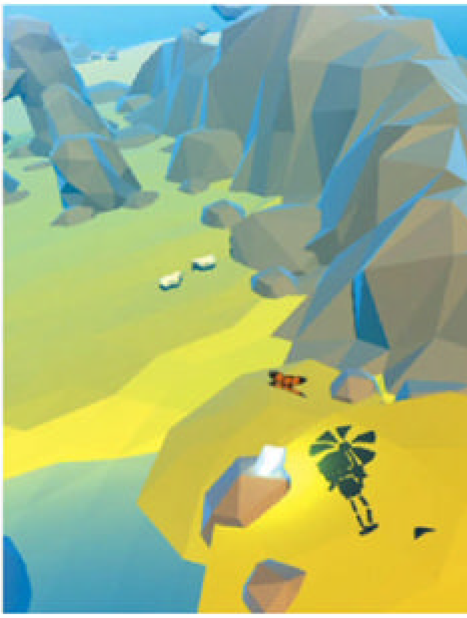
ETHER ONE

WORSE THAN

It's easy to look at smaller, digital games from behemoth publishers with an unfair sense of cynicism. There's a certain appeal that attaches itself to the word 'indie', a sort of inexplicable resistance against the supposed greed of corporations. So when Ubisoft releases a colourful, simple digital title all the while distancing itself from the process and flinging Ubisoft Reflections into the spotlight… well, that's when the furrowed brows start appearing. When big business starts getting involved, that's where the questions start getting asked. There are no pitchforks here, however; whatever the motive, *Grow Home* is a pleasant couple of hours.

You play as B.U.D, the flailing-armed robot whose sole task is to nurture a 'star flower' for no other reason than you've been told to. That alone is a refreshing approach – gameplay for the sake of it – and it needs nothing more than its vague and loose storyline to pin it all together. Your goal is to plug the flower's phallic offshoots into nearby floating rocks, guiding the ever-growing branch into its ultimate destination. Of course it's not quite as simple as that, since you first need to reach the budding flowers to activate its sudden growth spurt. As a result you'll spend much of the game left-click, right-clicking as you guide the robot hand-by-hand carefully up the side of rockfaces, flora and even the thick trunk of the star flower itself. It's an unusual system, one whose very action adds an extra sense of tactility to the gameplay. It creates an enduring sense of personal growth across *Grow Home*'s short runtime, an idea that – as you become better at manipulating the awkward animations of B.U.D. – you've gone through a similar journey to the flower itself. Sadly it's not quite perfect, and ultimately the very control system will cause you to slip, fail and sometimes can become a point of frustration as you're forced to repeat a particularly arduous navigational challenge.

Aside from the required objective, there's an unforced set of optional alternatives, too.



Above: You'll find a couple of items you can use as safety nets should you accidentally fall, but if you do you may be better forcing a death and a respawn instead.

Below: Once you get to grips with the unique controls you can find yourself having a bit of fun just navigating the colourful world. It's just a shame there isn't more to do in the game itself to enforce this kind of gameplay.





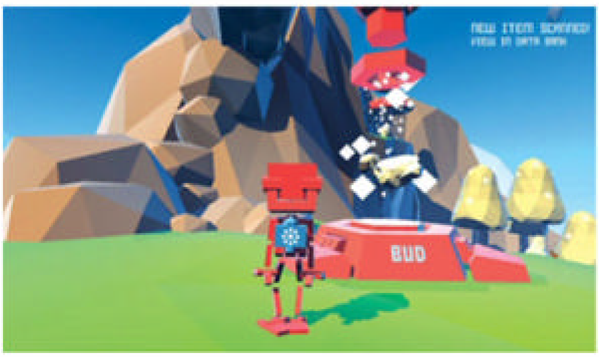
FAQs

Q. HOW LONG?
Start to finish? Roughly two hours, but a couple more if you want to do absolutely everything.

Q. A LOT OF COLLECTIBLES?
Not really, and those that are there aren't really emphasised by the game itself.

Q. ANY UPGRADES?
As you collect crystals you'll gain some better functions, but nothing to get excited about.

Below: Struggling to pull a sheep one-handed up the side of a hill might not sound like the most entertaining form of gaming in the world, but there's a satisfying thrill to achieving the self-set goal.



GROW HOME IS NOT A SUCCESS IN A MECHANICAL FASHION, BUT INSTEAD IN A CONTEMPLATIVE ONE

The first is a set of 100 crystals embedded within the landscape; collect enough of these and at periodic milestones you'll be rewarded with a minor – but helpful – upgrade. The second is a database of fauna and flora that inhabit this colourful environment, a database that can only be compiled by dragging each undocumented item to one of only a handful of teleporters. These become a puzzle in and of themselves, the reward in the very completion of the act rather than any tangible benefit from the game itself. Disappointingly, it does mean that – without any recompense for the considerable challenge doing so can pose – there's no sense of drive to actually attempt to carry these items to the teleporters, ultimately making this side venture a thankless task not worth the willpower required to complete it. Animals will resist, for example, and some will even attack you – suffering the stress for nothing other than personal achievement just isn't worthwhile.

And in a way that's the biggest problem with *Grow Home*. The very act of climbing to the top of the world is, in itself, enjoyable enough to see you through to the end, but even before its couple of hours are over, your interest begins to wane. The sense of exploration is drawn upon from the crystals, the challenge from the database; but nothing in the core game matches that sense of exploration. There's a twee enjoyment in creating arbitrarily spiralled stems, but it quickly becomes an irritant when you're required to use more than one branch to connect to a power source – wasteful spiralling is too easily forgotten for the sake of the job.

It's almost as if *Grow Home* is imitating the concept of a modern indie game – those exploratory, sensory experiences we see so much of – rather than actually understanding what makes such a title appeal to gamers. There needs to be more to do and see to feed the inquisitive mind, more to give outside of itself. Each milestone in the flower's growth adds renewed vigour, providing another platform from which to wander off and search for these optional extras – proof that Grow Home's success is in aimlessness, a contrast to the very direct nature of plugging those branches into their various power sources. There just isn't enough superfluous extras to maintain your interest, and that's where *Grow Home* could have succeeded the most.

In spite of all this, it does manage to offer an experience worthy of its admittedly low cost. It's a serene sort of game, a tranquil, uncomplicated few hours of exploration. The combination of unique, polygonal art style and hushed audio and sound effects make for a relaxing, peaceful title and once it's over there is more to do in the form of collectibles and even a new, post-ending task – but it's largely unrequited. *Grow Home*, after all, is not a success in a mechanical fashion, but instead in a contemplative one and once you've achieved that main goal there's not really much more desire to continue.

And that's fine; it would be unfair to expect more from something that isn't looking to offer it. Though comparisons to thatgamecompany's *Journey* – or, perhaps more fittingly, *Flower* – are abundant here, *Grow Home* simply doesn't impart the same scale of emotion. It is pleasing, not passionate; calming, not compelling. In that there's an argument, perhaps, that the sentiment was lost in the corporate machine, but to suggest so would discredit Ubisoft Reflections' work here. *Grow Home* isn't the masterpiece you'll hang on the wall, it's the vase of tulips on the coffee table – appreciated at the time, but forgotten once they wither.

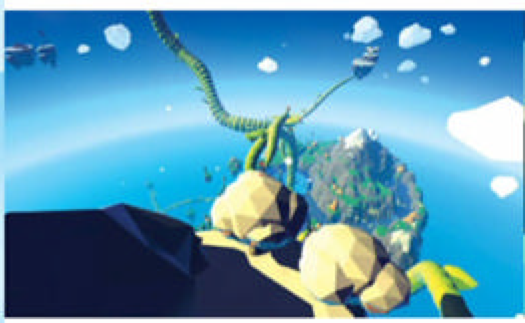
MISSING LINK

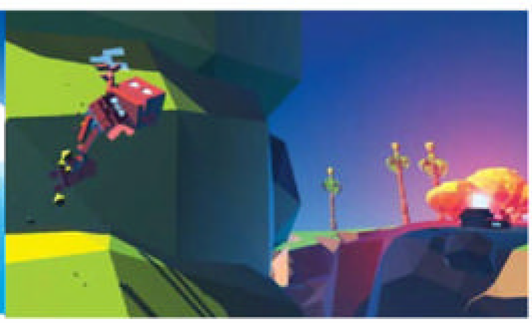
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

WHERE IN THE WORLD: Grow Home doesn't foster a sense of exploration, but it's unique design and quirky controls enable a sense of fascination – Ubisoft needed to enhance that side of things.

GET OVER HERE

The challenge of taking flora and fauna to teleportation points – in particular, the few animals you'll meet – adds a greater layer of emergent puzzle solving that *Grow Home* just doesn't have inherently in its game design. It almost makes us wish that Ubisoft Reflections had focused on scanning the various elements of this new world as the main objective of the game, added much more disparate creatures and plants to find and provided a greater reward upon completion of each new scan. It'd help bolster the sense of exploration that *Grow Home* doesn't empower nearly enough, and would make each new discovery much more personally elating.





VERDICT 6/10
QUAINT SUNDAY AFTERNOON GAMING, AND NOT MUCH ELSE



NOSTALGIA JUNKIES REJOICE

Homeworld Remastered Collection

Amongst the spate of remasters, remakes and rehashes of the last few years, *Homeworld* is more worthwhile than others. While the worst examples have been cynical attempts to cash-in with a casual re-skin or improved texture pack, the best have added genuine value to the original proposition. Happily, the *Homeworld Remastered Collection* falls into the latter camp, with new franchise custodian, Gearbox Software, even taking the opportunity to make small adjustments to improve the underlying game based on wisdom drawn from careful retrospection and a vocal fan base.

It's a testament to the strengths of the 1999 original and its 2003 sequel that this space-based RTS is worth re-introducing into the 2015 PC game market at all. *Homeworld* was a revelation when it was originally released, offering epic space combat in a three-dimensional environment and while commanding dozens of units and simultaneously manipulating multiple axes has become second nature to today's audience, *Homeworld* still has much that shines with which to dazzle.

Its narrative beats to an evocative score and its story is a space opera of the highest order that sees a beleaguered race left homeless aboard a giant mothership; its planet destroyed in retaliation for the unwitting contravention of a four-thousand-year-old covenant. What follows is part-revenge, part-relocation effort as you guide the Kushan against the ruthless Taiidan empire with the story unfolding via in-game chatter and stylised, hand-drawn cut-scenes that bookend each of the game's sixteen missions. With another fifteen missions making up *Homeworld 2*, the two games are best viewed as two halves of one grand tale that make playing through both titles as engaging as a marathon weekend session spent watching *Battlestar Galactica* on Blu-ray.

Reinforcing *Homeworld*'s storytelling is its persistent structure, which sees all units and resources from one level carried over to the next. As such, it's possible to grow attached to groups of units that have performed particularly well, despite there being no explicit progression system or experience trees for them to gain meaningful veterancy. Instead, researching new technologies enables you to build new ships but it's reassuring to know that the early scouts and interceptors still have

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Gearbox Software
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £26.99
RELEASE: Out now
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows Vista, 2.2GHz Dual Core Processor, 1 GB RAM, NVIDIA GeForce 8800 GTS (512MB) / ATI Radeon HD4800 (512MB), 20 GB available space
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

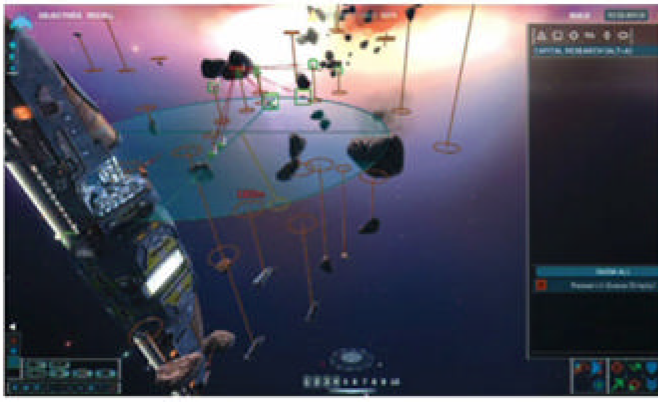
PLAYING THROUGH THIS IS AS ENGAGING AS A WEEKEND SPENT WATCHING BATTLESTAR GALACTICA

FAQs

Q. AS COMPLICATED AS IT LOOKS?
No, not really. The tutorial does a good job of introducing the basics and the difficulty curve is reasonable even for RTS newbies.

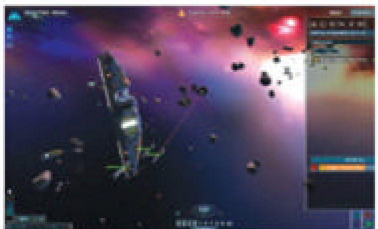
Q. WHERE'S HOMEWORLD: CATACLYSM?
Rumours abound that the source code has been lost, although former *Homeworld* devs have suggested that a remake could still be possible.

Q. ARE SPACESHIPS COOL AGAIN?
The number of high-profile releases lined-up for 2015 certainly suggests so.





Left: Effective use of 3D space is necessary to exploit some enemy unit weaknesses and later missions require canny use of waypoints and formation flying to maximise weaker ships' potential.



Right: Resource gathering is key to the resupply of your armada, which often means mining must continue even as war wages all around.





Below: The ability to target specific ship elements opens up several tactical options, although they are easy to overlook in the heat of battle.

a place in your fleet even after the hulking destroyers and heavy cruisers enter the fray.

In practice, it's you that grows in power and experience as you develop new tactics and a greater understanding of the advantages of the grouping and formation systems. By mixing the nimble but poorly armoured fighter units with heavier frigates and cruisers, you create numbered groups that specialise against rival ships' vulnerabilities or can run interception patterns when your mothership or resource gatherers come under fire. The action is most spectacular up close, although it's often most practical to view it from afar in order to react to new threats, particularly when your handful of units swells to a fully fledged armada

Straightforward but versatile ship abilities further enhance your ability to react to an unexpected turn of events. The lowly salvage corvette remains a favourite right to the end for while it lacks firepower, its ability to hustle lone enemy ships and drag them back to base for conversion and redeployment against their former masters is a trick that never gets old – and one that actually becomes essential later in the game. Despite the healthy variation in the five basic ship models and the fact that a number of the later levels prove incredibly challenging, the game does well to empower you with its systems, rather than leaving you feeling lost in space.

However, while most of the minor changes that Gearbox has elected to make ultimately enhance *Homeworld* – such as dropping the necessity to manage fuel as a resource and removing the requirement to mine resources at the end of each mission or lose them – a scant few appear less successful and so ships can be more frequently caught out of formation and pulverised than in the original *Homeworld*. As such, manual intervention is sometimes required to prevent errant units being pulverised by the larger prey that they are meant to be harrying.

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

SWEET SIXTEEN: By taking the time to consider how best to present a game from the late Nineties, Gearbox has shown it is capable of updating a beloved IP in an appropriate manner.

Homeworld's campaign missions constitute a worthwhile saga in their own right and the original versions of *Homeworld* and its sequel are also included for those who want to turn back the years. Nonetheless, there is an additional option present in the game launcher should you wish to test your mettle against rival captains. *Homeworld*'s multiplayer is in beta, which carries with it the associated caveats about being a work in progress, but it deftly blends together the remastered versions and their associated factions for both co-op and versus play. The former also introduces a simple but welcome competitive element by tasking cooperative partners with researching, building or mining a certain number of techs, ships or resource units before their teammates.

There are some balancing issues stemming mainly from the fact that it incorporates all four factions from both *Homeworld* titles that were theoretically never meant to meet. However, Gearbox appears committed to improving this element of the game and if it shows the same care and attention that it's shown elsewhere in the remastering then the multiplayer should grow to become a great deal more robust in the coming weeks and months.

This *Remastered Collection* represents a genuinely valuable and worthwhile reworking of beloved franchise that has been out of the spotlight for many years. It looks fantastic and boasts a story worth telling, but perhaps the most satisfying thing about this update is that it offers both long-term fans and new recruits the same thing: a solid, rewarding and relevant space RTS that belies its significant age.

VERDICT 8/10
THE WAY REMASTERS SHOULD BE MADE

MODDABLE SPACE

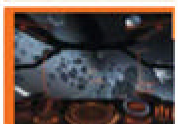
The *Homeworld* community never really went away, it just had to find alternative ways to enjoy its beloved franchise long after official support dried-up. That might explain why there are already scores of mods available for *Homeworld Remastered* via Steam Workshop. From those that rebalance the remastered versions' difficulty levels or tweak the AI and UI to those that restore classic movement and formation patterns, there's a multitude of ways to enhance this enhanced version still further. You can even turn a certain legendary starship into a giant grizzly bear…

BETTER THAN

TOTAL WAR: ROME 2



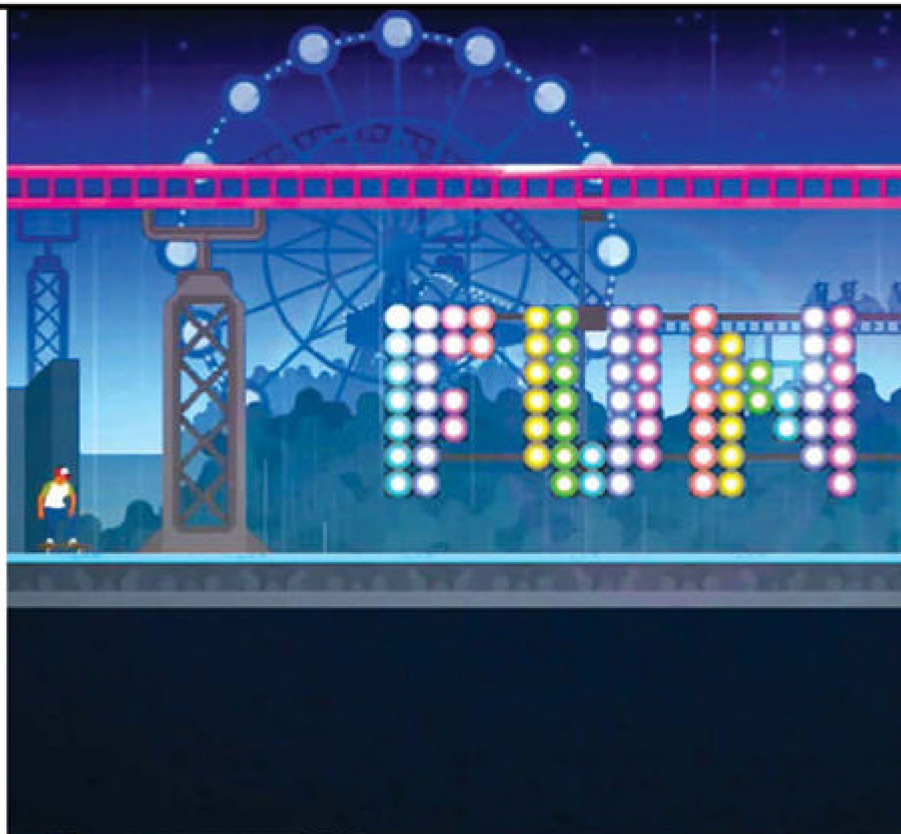
AS GOOD AS



ELITE: DANGEROUS

THIS IS HOW YOU ROLL NOW

OlliOlli 2: Welcome To Olliwood

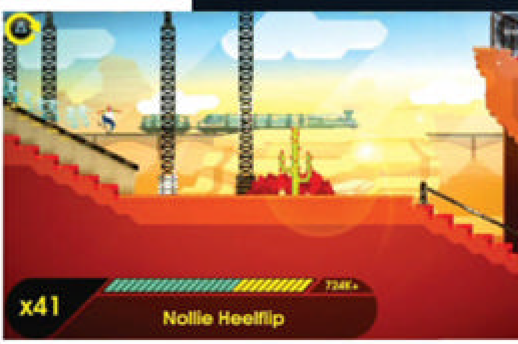


If the original *OlliOlli* could very broadly be described as a 2D version of EA Black Box's *Skate*, then its sequel is essentially a 2D version of Neversoft's *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 3*. Any semblance of realism has been unceremoniously kickflipped to the curb, and the ludicrous gameplay is augmented by a newly garish visual style and a universe of ghoulish theme parks and futuristic cityscapes. The modest visuals of the original have been overhauled completely, and not only is there a more fluid sense of momentum here, but also unassuming-but-effective pyrotechnics like fireworks and lens flare. This doesn't feel like a 16-bit relic, but a scaled-down port of the most sophisticated skateboarding game ever made; with everything curtailed except for the gameplay.

Tony Hawk's 3 was all about linking lengthy grinds together via manuals and reverts, and so is *OlliOlli 2*. In a bona fide masterstroke, Roll7 has vividly colour-coded almost every applicable surface. In the Carnival of the Dead area, the ground is a bright baby blue and grind rails are blazing hot pink, while in the Multi Platform Development zone they're sky blue and fiery orange respectively. This gives the gameplay a very visceral kind of immediacy; although the supremely difficult later levels virtually demand that you learn them before you're able to earn respectable high scores, you can swoop through the first half of the game entirely by the seat of your pants. Those first few levels occasionally feel like they've been torn straight out of a rhythm action game, and the timing-based demands – when you're trying to nail pitch perfect landings and grinds – have been

DETAILS

FORMAT: Playstation 4
OTHER FORMATS: Playstation Vita
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Roll7
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £9.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



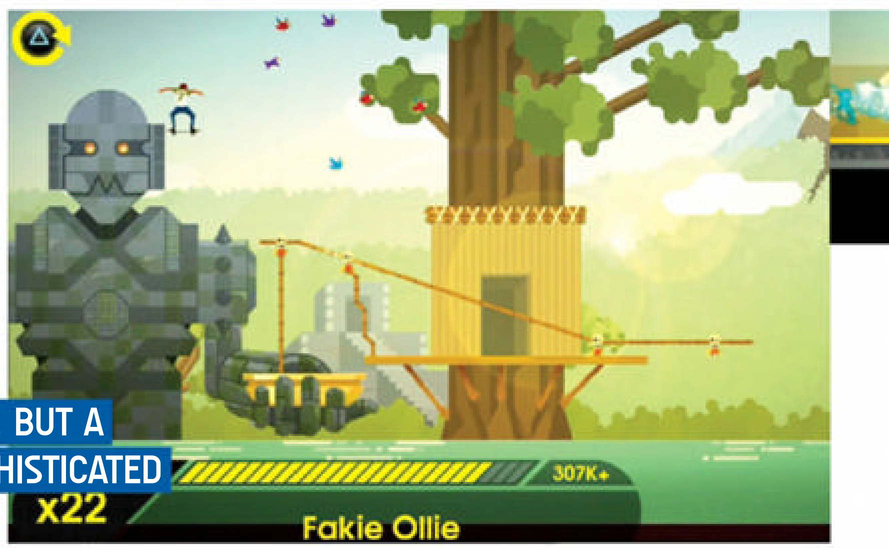


FAQs

Q. IS IT DIFFICULT?
It's definitely tough later on, but this is a much more accessible game than the first one was.

Q. ANY OTHER FORMATS?
Nothing has been announced officially, but you can probably expect *OlliOlli 2* to appear elsewhere at some point.

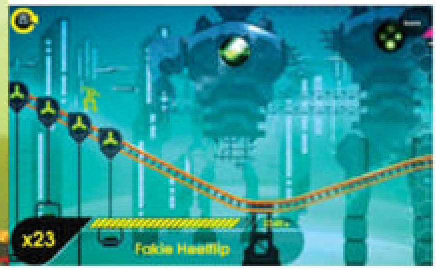
Q. IS THERE CO-OP?
Not at launch, but Roll7 has promised that four-player local multiplayer modes are well on their way.



THIS DOESN'T FEEL LIKE A 16-BIT RELIC, BUT A SCALED-DOWN PORT OF THE MOST SOPHISTICATED SKATEBOARDING GAME EVER MADE

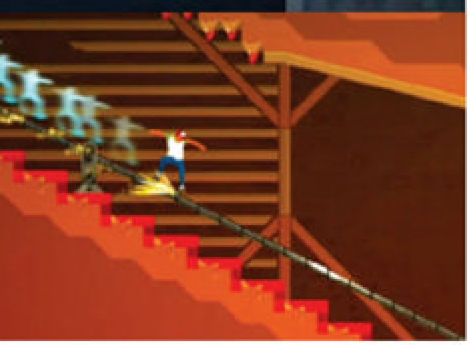


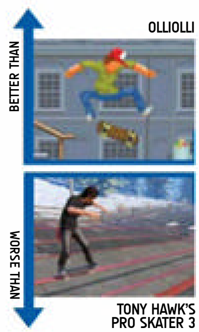


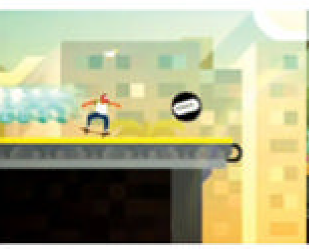


Left: Big tricks result in big momentum: a formula that will prove invaluable when you're furiously trying to gather a bit of speed. Being conservative with your tricks does not help in the long run.

Left: If you played the original game on the Playstation Vita and recall the alternately skittish and laggy touchscreen menus, you can rest easy: they've been scrapped. *OlliOlli 2* on Vita is a polished carbon copy of the PS4 version.









ever-so-slightly slackened. It would be only a minor understatement to suggest that *OlliOlli 2*'s opening makes the beginning of its predecessor look like the final stretch of *Super Meat Boy*.

But purists needn't worry. As in the first game, buried underneath the Amateur levels are some deeply challenging Pro re-skins, which in turn are superseded by the ludicrously tough Rad mode iterations. While Rad mode has been created expressly for the harder-than-hardcore, the Pro levels are far more palatable than their counterparts in the first game. Around half of them need to be studied and involve a hefty amount of trial and error, but the other half can be buzzed through relatively painlessly. You won't complete any of the applicable Pro challenges without a fight, but this neat fifty-fifty split is a very gracious way of making non-obsessives feel welcome for longer.

Because of the sheer intravenous excitement that it provides, Grind Switching is the smartest new gameplay mechanic by some distance. It allows you to pivot 180 degrees during a grind, and because the game knows how tempting (and rewarding) those manoeuvres are to execute, hardly any grind-able surfaces in the campaign are lengthy enough for you to be able to do so comfortably. When you're on the hunt for high scores, this system turns every grind into a tense gamble, primarily because tricking too soon after a grind switch results in an instantaneous bail. It's quite easy to ignore grind switching at first, but once you've started dabbling you won't be able to leave it alone; a situation that will coincide with the demolition of the scores of any friends who haven't taken a similar plunge. Disappointingly, the revert system, bountiful as it often appears to be in terms of points, is something of a hollow inclusion in comparison.

The Daily Grind, in which online players have 24 hours (and one attempt, not including practice runs) to post a high score to a specific track section, was a genius idea from the get-go, but suffered terribly because of the first game's somewhat fudged launch. Online leaderboard support was desperately faulty for almost a full month after *OlliOlli* debuted on Vita, but there doesn't appear to be any such issues here. If you ever need reminding that the Daily Grind is an excellent excuse for you to switch on *OlliOlli 2* during your honeymoon period, a daily countdown timer is perpetually housed – as it was previously – in the top left corner of the level select menu.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

BRISK TUTORIAL: It could be argued that the original OlliOlli had a rather obtuse tutorial. No such complaints will be made this time. The learning curve here is very slight in comparison.

The bite-sized Spots mode returns too, and because of the wealth of new weapons (read: tricks) that are available to you, it's even more compelling than it was last time. Every last spot course has leaderboard support, and there's even a leaderboard for each player's overall mode tally. When you're competing against friends, Spots continues to be a diabolical time sink, and the only disappointment involves the lack of a *Trials Evolution*-style replay lobby. Replays are most sorely missed on the later tracks that contain multiple pathways; the alternate routes almost always feel completely balanced, but it's often very difficult not to wonder why your high score isn't quite bothering the leaderboard's upper echelons. Despite the relish of the game's more secretive fanatics, the appearance of a communal replay system – whether it be at a later date or in a sequel – is all but guaranteed.

OlliOlli 2 is polished and thrilling in ways that its predecessor was not. The original game was all about honing a series of perfect little moments, and the sequel demands that you now string them seamlessly together. Whether you tackle it on Playstation 4 or Playstation Vita, it is a glorious stronghold of scintillating craftsmanship and ingenious design. Bigger games will launch on both systems this year, whether any of them are finer than this remains to be seen.

VERDICT 9/10
A DAZZLING BLAST OF NEAR-PERFECTION

POP? SHOVE IT.

The original *OlliOlli*'s soundtrack was praised for its quality as well as for how brilliantly unusual it was, and the sequel is happy to continue in that tradition. *OlliOlli 2* features tracks from jazz performer Mike Slott, electro specialist Troy Gunner, Ninja Tune luminary Slugabed and the American multi-instrumentalist StarRo. The sequel's initial status as an off-kilter rhythm action game wouldn't exist if the soundtrack wasn't this good, and the team at Roll7 clearly collated these tracks very carefully indeed. Sadly though, there is currently no way of buying (digitally or otherwise) a soundtrack album for this game or its predecessor. That said, there is a full track listing available in the 'Music' section of the credits menu for those wishing to adopt a DIY approach.





Left: *Monster Hunter* has always been best when played with friends and the fourth game is no exception. Teaming up with up to three others is the best way to take on the game's bigger beasts, such as elder dragon Teostra.

NEWCOMERS, THE HUNT FOR AN ENTRY POINT IS OVER

Monster Hunter 4 Ultimate

From its opening scene, which forces you into a naval battle against a massive sea beast and sees you crawling on its back at one point, it's clear that *Monster Hunter 4 Ultimate* is trying to offer something different to its predecessors. Granted, its underlying aim remains the same: as the titular monster hunter, the player must embark on numerous quests to slay various enormous beasts. This time, however, narrative takes more of a central role, giving more reason to what you're doing and introducing a storyline eventually involving a virus that turns relatively weak monsters into ruthless beasts.

It's also far more welcoming to newcomers this time around, its wealth of optional tutorial quests making it the best jump-in point for those curious about the series but intimidated by the third game's unspoken "You know what you're doing, we'll let you get on with it" tone.

Battles make more use of verticality this time, with players able to gain higher ground and use it to leap on top of monsters from above, performing stronger attacks and even mounting them at times to allow for numerous strikes. This is reflected in the landscapes which are more complex than those in the third game, offering numerous ledges and cliffs and generally making the environment feel more like a real world to be explored rather than elaborately disguised battle arenas.

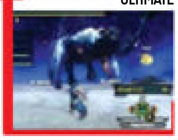
Capcom has clearly taken on board feedback from fans of the series, which would go some way to explaining why underwater combat, despised by many, has thankfully been removed from this latest entry. It hasn't completely answered all our prayers, however: for example, the often infuriating egg-carrying quests – in which players have to capture monster eggs and transport them to a different area, with the very real likelihood that they'll be dropped at some point – make an unwelcome return.

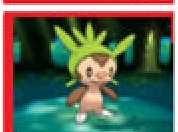
The game isn't without other niggles too. Controlling the camera can be a bit fiddly if you don't have the benefit of a second analogue control provided by the Circle Pad Pro or New 3DS, and though there's an option to lock the camera to the beast you're currently fighting there can still be times where it feels awkward. Meanwhile, while co-op quests are a treat when played locally, the lack of voice chat when playing them online means they can feel like oddly lonely experiences even when joined by three other friends, making local the way to go if possible.

These problems aside, *Monster Hunter 4 Ultimate* is probably the best game in the series to date. Though there are still some who will be intimidated by its scale and put off by its deliberately slow, momentum-based combat style, it's as accessible as it's ever been and should be a positive step forward in Capcom's quest for widespread *Monster Hunter* love in the west.

VERDICT 8/10
NOT WITHOUT ISSUES, BUT THE BEST ENTRY YET

DETAILS
FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Capcom
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN
MONSTER HUNTER 3 ULTIMATE


WORSE THAN

POKEMON X & Y

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL
EXPEDITIONS: These drop you in a randomly-generated area with random monsters to fight. You can then generate a quest based on your discovery and send it to other players to take on.



Above: Each monster requires a specific strategy to defeat it. Sand dragon Dah'ren Mohran is easiest to beat by firing cannonballs at it from your ship to weaken it and ideally break its arms, rendering it incapable of performing some attacks.



SPECIAL USA SUBS OFFER

$94 For 13 issues



Never miss another issue

- 148 pages of multiformat gaming content
- Dedicated retro section
- Receive your copy before it goes on sale in stores
- Save 27%* when you subscribe today
- Money-back guarantee

TO SUBSCRIBE

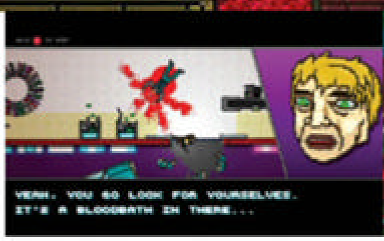
Online www.imaginesubs.co.uk/gtm
and quote USA3

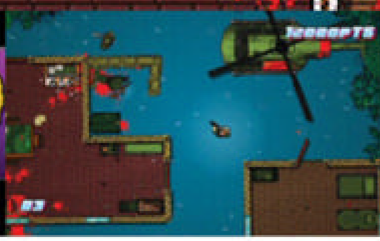
Telephone +44 (0) 1795 592 864

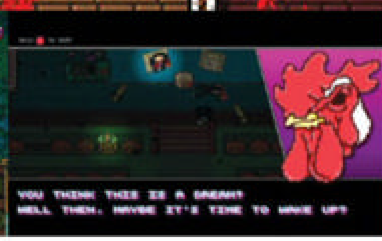
T&Cs: You will actually be charged £60 sterling for an annual subscription. This is equivalent to $94 at the time of writing, although the exchange rate may vary. Your subscription will start from the next available issue and run for 13 issues. *The 27% saving refers to the newsstand price of $9.99 for 13 issues being $129.87, compared with $94 for a subscription. This offer expires 30th April 2015.

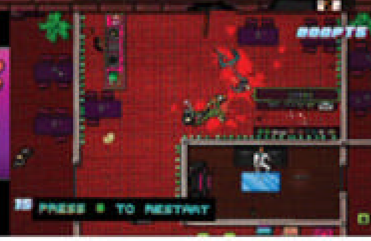


HOTLINE MIAMI 2 ELEGANTLY DESTROYS THE NAYSAYERS CLAIMING 'PIXEL ART' HAS KILLED ITSELF THROUGH CLICHÉ AND SATURATION



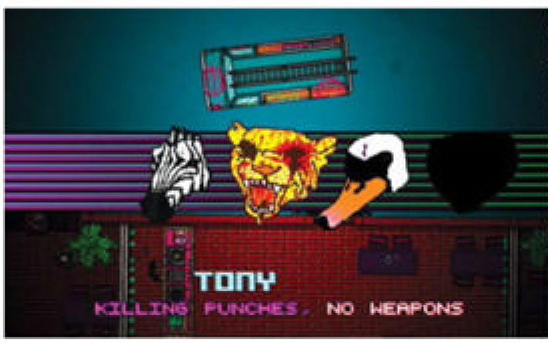


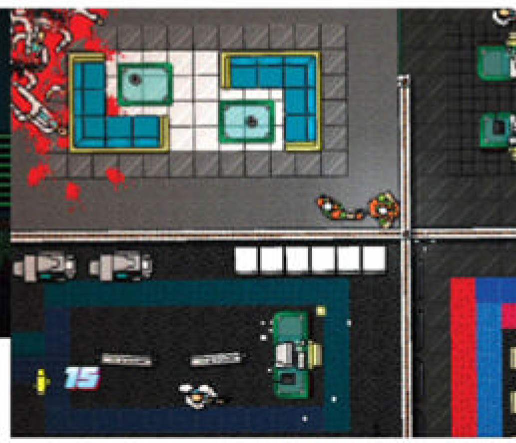




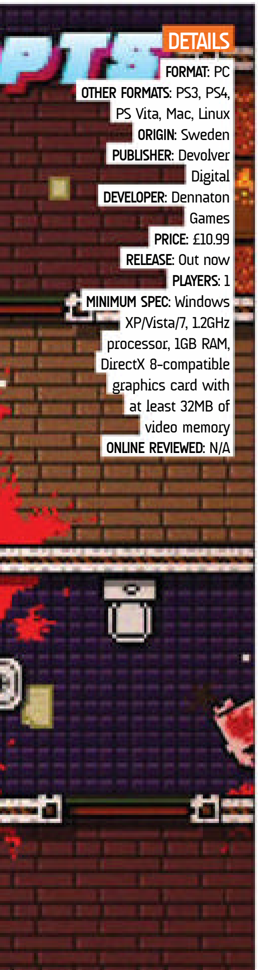
YOUR OWN PERSONAL SLAUGHTER

Currently in 'alpha', *Hotline Miami 2* will eventually include a full level editor within which you can create your own arenas to shot and stab your way through. A simple grid system allows you to place floor tiles, doors, walls, enemies, stairs and weapons wherever you see fit. The editor is currently in a bare bones state, but it works beautifully once you've got to grips with its quirks of presentation. If you're the masochistic type that thinks the main game doesn't hold enough challenge, then you've all the tools you need here to raise the difficulty. Anyone care to place a wager on how long it'll be before someone knocks up a *Star Wars*-inspired level? And that it will be absolutely brutal?





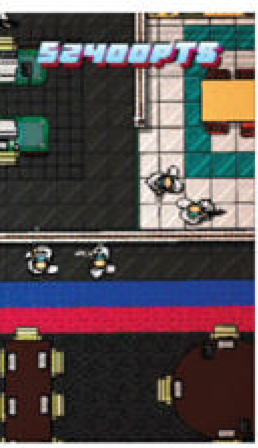
Above: As in the original, different masks provide you different abilities and, sometimes, limitations. Tony, for instance, can kill with his fists but he can't wield any weapons whatsoever. Once you've gotten to grips with the playing style, it's one of the more rewarding masks to wear.



DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS3, PS4, PS Vita, Mac, Linux
ORIGIN: Sweden
PUBLISHER: Devolver Digital
DEVELOPER: Dennaton Games
PRICE: £10.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows XP/Vista/7, 1.2GHz processor, 1GB RAM, DirectX 8-compatible graphics card with at least 32MB of video memory
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Above: The content on offer here is most certainly not suitable for kids, the visual style often resulting in an unnerving juxtaposition between extreme violence and rainbow-chromatic gaudiness. Most certainly, there are scenes more graphic than those shown here.



INTO A HEART OF DARKNESS

Hotline Miami 2: Wrong Number

The difficult second album problem applies not only to music. In the realm of videogames, plenty of revered games and creators have been undermined by an inability to provide a sequel that is anywhere near the quality of the original. But from the challenging content to the arresting visuals, from the achingly cool music to the ferocious difficulty, everything that made *Hotline Miami* great is served up once again here.

Don't think the similarities undermine the experience, though. A range of initially subtle changes to the formula eventually reveal themselves as impactful and welcome alterations and additions. Most immediate is the greater diversity. Where the first game saw you ransack a number of buildings that featured uniformly similar shades of pink floors, white walls and brown doors, here you're quickly moved between interior and exterior locations, gang hideouts and film sets, forests and night clubs. It's a glorious diversification of a focused visual style and one that elegantly destroys the naysayers claiming 'pixel art' has killed itself through cliché and saturation.



Above: Narrative moments such as this, in which a movie star is being interviewed for TV in front of a live audience, are carriers for the themes and messages that *Hotline Miami 2* is so skilled at communicating.

The broader range of colour schemes and layouts is mirrored in the varying scale of levels, with the long-winded and exhausting transitioning into the short and sharp, and back again. Pleasingly, this prevents the campaign feeling like a chore. Just as fatigue over the impenetrability is beginning to set in you're given a decidedly easier task to overcome, allowing you to regain your composure before being thrown back to the sharks.

Understandably buoyed by the plaudits it has received, Dennaton has branched out into more complex mission design to fill these expansive spaces. A new type of difficulty is thrown at you in the form of strict loadout limits, with certain missions asking you to select a weapon and forcing you to stick with it until completion. This flies in the face of one of *Hotline Miami*'s core building blocks: the ability to pick up and throw away any weapon you come across.

These weapon-limiting missions stick out in the mind as expertly balanced examples. The very fact that designer Jonatan Soderstrom knows which weapon you're holding allows him to better craft a level that tests very specific skills, something that, in hindsight, the original lacked once you'd reached a certain degree of competence. Brutally, there are missions that refuse you the right to use firearms at all and yet take great pleasure in throwing what can seem like an endless stream of enemies your way. Remaining open to experimentation is key to progression given this consistent changing of the rules. The player doomed to failure is the one that stubbornly sticks to methods that have seen success in the past, with certain levels here going so far as to switch which character you're in control of partway through… sometimes multiple times.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

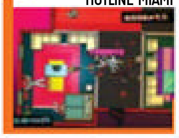
GREATER VARIETY: Everything from the visuals to the challenges to the characters have been diversified.
RUNNING TIME: It's bigger than the original, requiring you to spend more hours reaching its conclusion.

It's eye-opening to see just how much a slight change in your available actions change the experience. This stands as testament to how well honed *Hotline Miami*'s underlying principles really are, with every slight deviation resulting in a clear and obvious modification and effect. The emphasis on using different characters and being forced to master different abilities makes sense when viewed through the narrative. Set primarily after the events of *Hotline Miami 1*, the story encapsulates the personal lives of many more characters. Before the finale you're given access to the eyes of a troubled actor, a soldier, a detective, a journalist and more.

Themes centre around political and social unrest, with emphasis on the effect that horror, gore and violence as depicted in the media has had, and might continue to have, on civilisation as a whole. The journalist embodies this idea with particular elegance, his seemingly neutral facade able to be corrupted by the player should you so desire. By presenting this content via the different viewpoints and experiences held by the cast, Dennaton has managed to both expand its narrative horizons and lay waste to the idea that its particular brand of controversial bloodshed is nothing more than gratuitous self-publicity. There will, of course, be those that venomously object to the content here (it's already banned in Australia), but a deeper reading of the subject matter reveals a message that stands in protest to certain elements of our present reality. It's a message written in the language of that which it stands in opposition against. What better way to get your point across?

Everything here, from the narrative to the gameplay, is completely devoid of hand-holding and patronisation. What can be learned and understood takes time to uncover and master, a tack that sets *Hotline Miami 2* apart from modern mainstream game design and its obsessing over players never feeling 'stuck' or 'frustrated'. It takes effort to receive your rewards here and, as a result, success is all the more satisfying. It is, therefore, worth playing through everything included multiple times to fully appreciate the goals that Dennaton has aimed for and the results it has achieved. This is not merely a sequel worth playing, it's one worth consuming again and again until its every secret has been revealed.

BETTER THAN
HOTLINE MIAMI



WORSE THAN
GTA V



FAQs

Q. DO I NEED TO PLAY THE ORIGINAL?
The narrative continues on from the first game, so a level of familiarity certainly helps.

Q. IS THERE ANY FORM OF MULTIPLAYER?
No, as with the original this is a strictly single-player only game.

Q. MORE HOTLINE AFTER THIS?
Dennaton has previously stated that this will be the final game in the series.

VERDICT 9/10
ONE OF THE BEST GAMES OF 2015 SO FAR



THEY HAVE ARRIVED

Final Fantasy Type-0 HD

Let's be honest, what we've played of *Final Fantasy*'s Fabula Nova Crystallis series hasn't been great. So far, it consists of a polarising mainline *Final Fantasy* title, a poor sequel to that game, and some gratuitous Lightning fan service. So, it's actually a relief to see something *different* (ie something that doesn't have 'XIII' in the title) in this "new tale of the crystal", even if it has taken three and a half years to reach our shores.

Final Fantasy Type-0 has transcended its PSP origins and has made a new high-definition home on the PS4 and Xbox One, courtesy of developers, HexaDrive, who previously worked on remasters of *Okami* for PS3 and *The Wind Waker* for the WiiU. A lot of *Type-0*'s original praise was focussed on its core systems, approach to combat and presentation, and that praise somewhat translates to the HD version, albeit diluted.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: HexaDrive
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

From the off, it is clear that *Type-0 HD* is a glorified PSP game and, to be fair, no attempt has been made to hide that fact. Environments are small, cutscenes are sparse, and the game has a handheld-friendly mission-based approach to its story. Textures and models have been updated and are up to scratch with the last generation, but the PS4 and Xbox One aren't exactly going to strain when handling this. It's pretty baffling, then, that we've heard no murmurs of a PS3, 360 or even PSVita release, because they can all likely bear the brunt of this lightweight title. Don't let this put you off, though, because if you are willing to see past this, you will be rewarded with a gem of a *Final Fantasy* title.

TYPE-0 HD'S OBVIOUS STRENGTH IS IN ITS COMBAT SYSTEM. THE GAME'S COMBAT PLAYS OUT LIKE A MUCH MORE FLUENT KINGDOM HEARTS

The game spins a tale of war, where a nation that can only be described as evil 'just because' invades its neighbours using unprecedented and brutal methods. Class Zero, a band of elite cadets (and your playable characters) has been charged with the liberation of its home country. This then leads to covert missions that will affect the outcome of the war. This is rather a basic concept for a game that bears the *Final Fantasy* moniker, as anyone who's played any of them will know. However, credit where it is due, *Type-0 HD* approaches its story in a well-executed dark tone. In one of the opening scenes a stoic, likeable character – and his Chocobo –

FAQs

Q. DO SUMMONS RETURN?
Yes, your party leader holds the ability to summon an Eidolon, however, at the cost of their life.

Q. WHAT ABOUT LIMIT BREAKS?
Kind of. You can execute a 'Triad' where each member of your squad performs a special attack.

Q. WHAT'S THE CRYSTAL THEME?
Like all *Final Fantasys*, *Type-0 HD* has a theme surrounding crystals. This time, crystals are kind of like gods or fal'Cies.





Left: The game's story is one of war, and the dark presentation reflects that. There are times where you feel uncomfortable with what you are watching, and, for a *Final Fantasy* game, that's something new.







Below: Without a doubt, Ace is the most versatile character and is one that new players should pick up first. He has a teleport and a mix of ranged and melee attacks, which makes him ideal for exploiting weaknesses.

gets gunned down and is left crying out for his mother while he slowly bleeds out next to his feathered steed as they perish together. This is the darkest *Final Fantasy* title we have seen, and that is by far not the worst thing that happens.

Type-0 HD's obvious strength is in its combat system. The game's combat plays out like a much more fluent *Kingdom Hearts*. You control one of three party members (although you are able to switch between them), who can move freely in the battle area whilst firing off attacks, abilities, or performing dodge-rolls and short-range teleports. Enemies have unique attack patterns, and, if you are observant enough, you can trigger a 'killsight' (read: instakill) when an enemy is exposed after they miss an attack. The combat, then, opens up an element of kiting, and mixing of abilities and attacks to achieve the best results; it's extremely fluent.

Supporting this combat system is *Type-0*'s cast of 15 playable characters. We'd forgive you for thinking that due to such a large number, some of these characters will be duffs, forever consigned to the forgotten part of your party list where the cobwebs grow. This is not the case. Each character feels different and there is so much variety that you will find someone who suits your style. Do you like the sound of the aforementioned kiting, and exploiting of weaknesses? Ace is your guy. How about Lancers and Dragoons, they're the badasses, right? Pick Nine. What if you only exclusively play Ivy from *SoulCalibur* and hate everyone else? Well now you also play as Seven. The variance is staggering and it's a feat to achieve this on a current-gen level, let alone on a PSP back in 2011.

With such a large cast comes an inevitable amount of micromanagement. Each character has their own level and ability tree, not to mention their own weapon and armour slots. Managing an entire roster can bring out the inner schoolteacher in you: obviously you have your favourites, but you have to toil away to bring everyone up to scratch, even the ones you *hate* – we're looking at you, Machina. A lot of the time you will find your downtime in between the game's missions grinding levels and ability points by triggering random battles in the Overworld to even out everyone's level. That's right: the Overworld. That system which we haven't seen since *FFIX* has finally made a welcome return. Not only has it returned, but it has been made better with the added inclusion of monsters you can encounter on the field alongside the classic random battles that we are familiar with.

But *Type-0 HD*'s excellent gameplay and systems are somewhat marred by some, quite frankly, antiquated problems. The game has a temperamental and 'jolty' camera which leads, to some frustrating moments where you either can't see where you are going or who you are targeting. There is also no way to tweak your ally's AI meaning they will run blindly into battle. This is particularly problematic in sequences where you are supposed to run from powerful foes and you see your team Leeroy Jenkins themselves to death.

If you are willing to look past its issues, then *Type-0* is definitely worth your time, and it is far better than some of the other games in the Crystallis series. If we had to choose any *Final Fantasy* game that acts as the harbinger for the messiah that is *Final Fantasy XV*, then it would be this one, purely thanks to its markedly similar and stellar combat system.

MISSING LINK
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

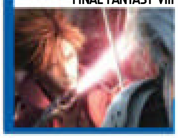
REMASTERED CONTROLS: Aside from an extra analogue stick, the remaster doesn't use the extra buttons that were absent on the PSP. Some functions require multiple button presses that could've easily been remapped.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT

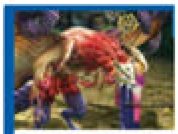
Similar to the *Persona* series, the game gives you a set amount of downtime in between story missions which you can spend as you like. Your allotted time can range from mere hours to days, and each activity consumes a set amount time. You can take part in lectures to enhance earn a roster-wide experience boost. You can also take to the game's Overworld and explore towns or caverns and complete tasks supplied by the various denizens of the world. If you can't be bothered with all that, you can simply report to the war room and speak with an officer to fast-forward time.

AS GOOD AS

CRISIS CORE: FINAL FANTASY VIII



WORSE THAN



FINAL FANTASY X/X-2 HD

VERDICT 7/10
A GOOD PLACEHOLDER FOR FINAL FANTASY XV



Above: While the surrounding areas are barren and lifeless, the actual rollercoasters gleam in pristine orange and the game moves quickly and smoothly even when you have your thumb jammed on the turbo.

LAST COAST ON THE LEFT

Screamride

We've always had something of a disconnect with rollercoaster games. As enjoyable and satisfying as it is to craft a rail-runner that would make The Big One look like the little one, it all feels a little bit pointless. Hitting the button to actually ride your creation just amplifies the difference between videogames and real life – there's no real thrill to watching a rollercoaster ride through a television screen. *Screamride*'s mission is to rectify this long-standing issue, by empowering you to actually control the car as it careens over the rails. Yes, you might not be able to change direction or drift around corners, but *Screamride* lets you determine how hard you want to take a bend, how quickly you're going, and even lets you push it to the absolute limit or suffer the consequences – your car flying off the rails and crashing into the surrounding scenery, smashing it to pieces in the process.

Frontier's latest is actually divided into three distinct sections. The aforementioned rail-riding is your introduction to this oddly anodyne world of faceless robot people and gurning thrill-seekers, but it's not the only way to fly. You can, of course, build your own coaster, in the finest Frontier tradition, and the game sets you a series of specific construction missions in order to learn the intricacies of what is a very accessible toolset. Rounding up the trio is, aptly, the option to shatter everything into dust. Destruction challenges let you fire a group of hapless *Screamride* testers out of a trebuchet, into a building, and watch as it comes collapsing to earth in a most satisfying fashion.

This is definitely a more varied theme park than we've had in recent years, although don't expect any sort of broad management overview – *Screamride* is, quite simply, all about rollercoasters. Build, ride, destroy. Quite why it's set in a universe that seems to be part *Portal* and part *Remember Me*, with robots that also look like fencers, is anyone's guess. Given, then, that the game insists on splitting things into threes, it makes sense for us to do the same. Riding the rails is probably the most interesting aspect of *Screamride* because it genuinely feels new. Obviously we've had plenty of fast-paced racing games that let you spin through loops and leap over massive gaps before, from *F-Zero* to *Extreme G*, but rarely have they been truly on-rails.

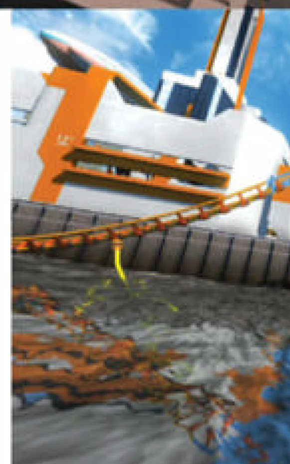
DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Microsoft
DEVELOPER: Frontier
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



BUILD A SCARE

Once you're done with *Screamride*'s career mode, you're free to build whatever you want in Sandbox. This lets you loose with the game's comprehensive toolkit, allowing you to build increasingly complex structures to either test your driving skills, or to see what sort of damage you can create. There's impressive depth once you get past standard rails too, with launchers and switches letting you create all manner of death-defying (or death-bringing) devices to the weird, futuristic land of *Screamride*. Anyone brought up on Frontier's rollercoaster games will be in heaven toying with such a complete toolkit, and with the opportunity to share your creations online, there's no limit to your rollercoasting ambitions.



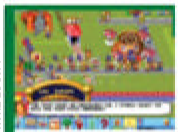




BETTER THAN

FUZION FRENZY 2





WORSE THAN

THEME PARK

FAQs

Q. CAN YOU BUILD ROLLER-COASTERS?
You certainly can, and the toolkit available is very easy to use .

Q. HOW'S THE DRIVING?
Simple but speedy and surprisingly unique. Its charms quickly wear off, but it's an exhilarating couple of hours.

Q. WHY IS EVERYONE A ROBOT?
This is a question for everyone at Frontier. Maybe they've all been playing too much *Elite Dangerous*.

Screamride makes up for this relative lack of interaction by allowing you to lean into bends, shifting the car's weight up onto two 'wheels' and gaining the maximum amount of lateral G-force before you topple over and send your poor crew into the ocean below.

Also, sections of the tracks are highlighted, and give you a turbo boost if you can time an 'X' button press just as you're about to exit them. Build up your boost and you can shave seconds off your time, but go too fast and, once again, you'll be in the drink. It's a surprisingly enjoyable and speedy experience, somewhere between a racer and a rhythm action game without ever reaching the heights of either genre. Still, there's something to be said about actually riding a rollercoaster you built yourself in Sandbox mode. Plus, the building itself is very slick. Early construction missions charge you with simply completing small sections of track (with the freedom to shape them how you wish), but as you progress you'll learn how to maximise your screams-per-second by building structures so grand and terrifying that no sane human being would ever dare ride them. And not just because they're likely to fly off into a nearby building, although that's probably a lot of the reason.

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

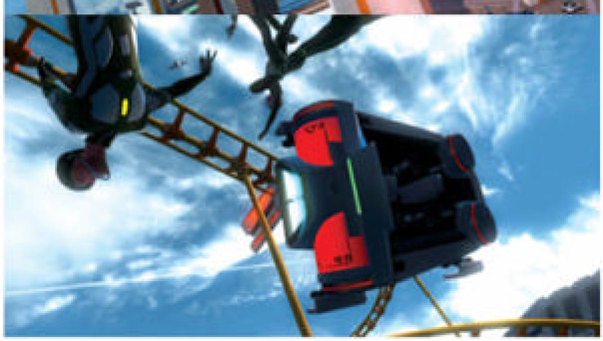
RIDE OR DIE: These rollercoasters are made to be ridden, and you can do just that.
THEN BREAK IT DOWN: When you're fed up of creating, you can just start destroying.

Anything you can build can be destroyed. Destruction mode sits somewhere between *Angry Birds* and short-lived Kinect effort *Wreckateer*. You can aim a sort of spinning trebuchet at the buildings ahead of you, then control its rotational speed before lining up your shot and letting go. A little bit of aftertouch brings to mind *Burnout*'s crash mode, but basically this is a mode about slinging a ball into a building and watching it fall down.

The physics are a little iffy – buildings tend to crumble at the slightest nudge – but who cares when it's so enjoyable to watch it all come crashing down. This is probably the slenderest of *Screamride*'s trifecta of rollercoaster action, but it's undeniably enjoyable. Perhaps best of all is the combination of all three elements. Building a deliberately dangerous coaster, riding it into oblivion, then controlling your free-flying car as it crushes a shiny structure, genuinely fun stuff. Sadly, it's nothing that can sustain your attention for much time.

FIRE A GROUP OF HAPLESS SCREAMRIDE TESTERS OUT OF A TREBUCHET INTO A BUILDING AND WATCH AS IT COMES COLLAPSING TO EARTH





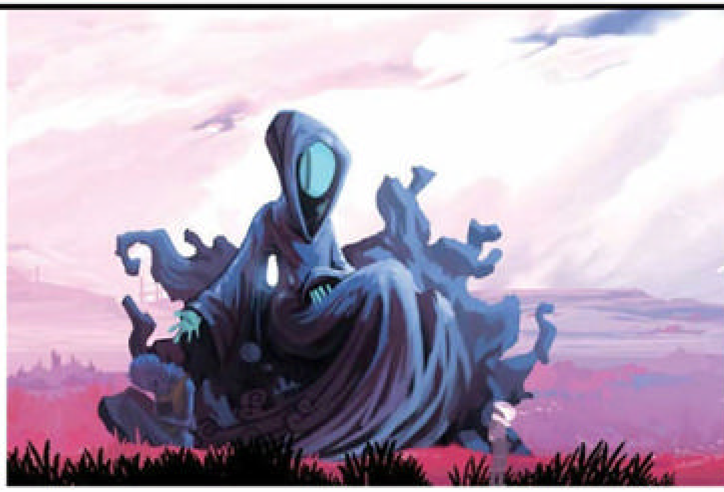
Above: Finally, you can live out your fantasy of chucking a bunch of idiots at a building from a high-powered vehicle. **Left:** *Screamride* feels like a solid game for a younger audience. Those who spend their after-school hours on *Minecraft* may get more enjoyment out of this simple construction set than a jaded adult.

Unless you're a true rollercoaster obsessive and the thought of architecturally challenging yourself to build the best and most beautiful rides in history really does it for you, *Screamride*'s a game that will burn brightly and then quickly flicker out. It feels like a great fit for a younger audience in fact, the kind who obsess over *Minecraft* secrets and still get a kick out of the simpler things in life – building stuff up just to watch it all fall down. *Screamride* will likely enjoy a core audience and – although it's always a bit ugly to say it – probably make for an excellent Games With Gold addition later on in the year. It's not the type of mainstream-breaking breakout hit like *Theme Park* once was – this satisfies a curious and very specific niche. Well-made, enjoyable, and completely forgettable. Kind of like a rollercoaster.

VERDICT 6/10
ENJOYABLE AND WELL MADE, BUT SHORT-LIVED

SO YOU THINK YOU COULD WRITE A GAME?

Elegy For A Dead World



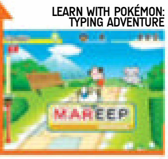
Above: *Elegy For A Dead World* has an illustrative style that is a great backdrop for sparking your imagination as you concoct your own tale in this world. It gives you a great deal to draw from as you write your masterpiece.

DETAILS

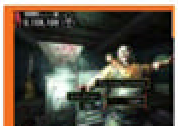
FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Mac
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Dejobaan Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £10.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows XP, Dual Core, 1 GB RAM, 512MB 3D card, 2 GB HDD space

BETTER THAN

LEARN WITH POKÉMON: TYPING ADVENTURE



WORSE THAN



THE TYPING OF THE DEAD

If you thought BioWare games gave you the power to write your own story through their adventures, then *Elegy For The Dead* puts it to shame. Planting you on a series of abandoned worlds, you have to write your thoughts on the desolation, flexing the kind of story-telling muscles that some modern games boil down to binary choices. No, this is more than just a choose-your-own-adventure game. It's a full-on story-writing tutorial.

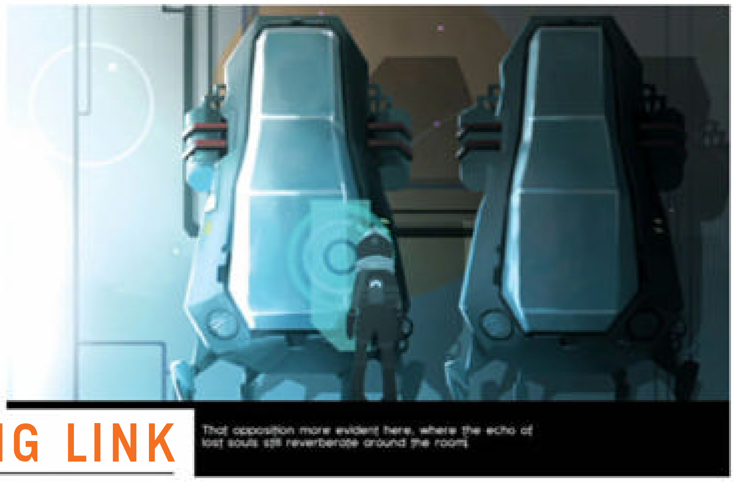
And yet it lacks the trappings and solid foundations of such an experience. It lacks much of what would make it a good game. The *Elegy For A Dead* world has little in the way of interactive elements or traditional gaming challenges. You move from left to right, hovering with a jetpack from time to time to speed up your progress, but there are no dangers to avoid or obstacles to overcome. There are huts and buildings you can enter, but nothing to interact with. All you have are writing prompts for you to spin your yarns.

Yet that's not necessarily a terrible thing. With a selection of writing prompts for each planet, filling in the blanks of these stories and building your own interpretation of the beautifully-realised 2D worlds you explore can be a lot of fun. The art style is wonderful and music very engaging. It sets a melancholy tone to the whole experience that can easily infect your writing and has lead to some rather dark and reflective work from other players, some of which you can read for yourself.

What's more, it has some intelligent additional modes like a free-writing setting that lets you type away your own story without the prompts of the developer and a series of grammar tests that asks you to correct the work you read, adding in proper punctuation and switching out incorrect words. It's just a shame we couldn't find any official scoring on how well we had done with those.

Which perhaps gets back to the key issue, that *Elegy For A Dead World* lacks the traditional trappings of a game and therefore fails to give you the depth of motivation or content to keep you coming back. With only three planets to explore and between 13 to 15 segments to write in per planet, there's not a mass to do with this game. Reading and recommending other people's work has its merit, but since everyone is working from the same outlines, there's little variation.

If you love the look of this setting and enjoy writing to prepared concepts it certainly has its benefits, but there's just not much of a game here.



MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

WRITE OR FLIGHT: The distinct lack of interactivity with this game means that while it has plenty to fire off the imagination, it has little to engage the gaming heart of its players.





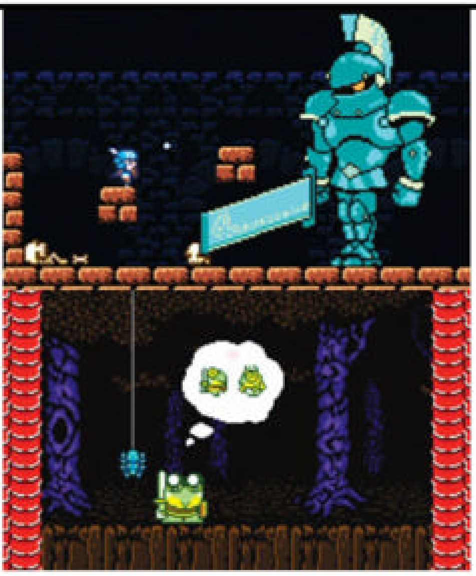
Above: Writing varies from short entries to longer prose. There's no limit to how much you add to the text, but brevity tends to work better.

VERDICT 4/10

A NOVEL IDEA, LACKING IN CONTENT

Below: There are tons of videogame references throughout the game – some overt, others not so much – but it ends up feeling forced, as though it's trying to win players over through familiarity.





SHADOW WARRIOR

Castle In The Darkness

Everyone's experienced the headshake. It's a subtle thing, a sharp – sometimes even unnoticeable – sidewards shift of the head, a gentle snort of air exhaling from the nostrils, a quick glance downwards and a knowing smirk. It's the gesture that every gamer has enacted at some point, a sign of almost humorous failure as the game you're trying to beat has, in fact, beaten *you* once more. Most recently *Dark Souls* will have drawn such humbled admissions of defeat, but give *Castle In The Darkness* a try and you'll be sure to suffer it more than once. This is how Nicalis' latest retro throwback draws you in: it's in the accidental misstep into a passing enemy, the failed reaction time for that all-important double jump or the unfairly positioned roof spike that drops in the exact spot you chose to stand when activating that switch. It'd be right to call *Castle In The Darkness* difficult, perhaps even cruel, but so finely tuned it is that it never borders into anger territory.

DETAILS

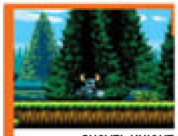
FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Nicalis
DEVELOPER: Matt Kap
PRICE: £4.79
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Pentium 4 CPU, 1GB RAM, 256MB GPU, 120MB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

DUST: AN ELYSIAN TAIL



AS GOOD AS



SHOVEL KNIGHT

It's the sort of praise lumped on the already-mentioned *Dark Souls* before, but where *Castle In The Darkness* often employs equally nefarious tricks to force your death, it doesn't suffer as the *Souls* series can for feeling cheap. Checkpoints are common (though sometimes your desperation may make it feel like they're never common enough), and the gameplay so quick that replaying a section with your newfound knowledge takes a matter of seconds; it's a subtle shake of the head, a click of the retry button and off you go once again.

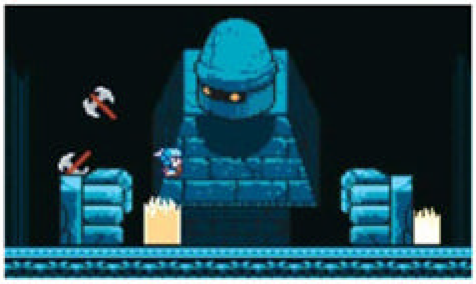
It doesn't make quite as much use of its varied items and equipment as you'd like to hope – from start to finish there is rarely much to necessitate backtracking – but that just makes the game all the more fulfilling. Remembering there was a character to revisit, a place you can now access or even the niggling feeling that you might've missed something early on gives you a secondary compulsion. It's an intriguing approach to such a familiar sort of game, where the linear desire to move onwards and destroy bosses is equalled by the more adventurous belief that there could be more to see.

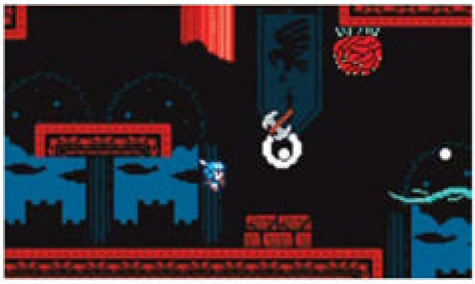
MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

CASTLE MANIA: This game isn't looking to change anything about the tried-and-tested formula, but it could do more than coast along on the success of the past to make it a true progenitor.

Your selection of weapons and spells will affect the way you play, and there are times when you'll hit a brick wall trying to overcome a certain set of obstacles – only to discover that a change in equipment will help matters vastly. And as the surprisingly long runtime rolls on, you'll find the game continues to offer up more interesting challenges and varied boss battles; that, in itself, should be cherished. Truthfully, though, *Castle In The Darkness* doesn't offer much in the way of originality, and it's only going to appeal to a nostalgia-riddled audience looking to relive the glory days of 16-bit sidescrollers – but it's super slick mechanics are reminiscent of an era where perfecting the gameplay was all that mattered, and in that sense this game can't be beaten.

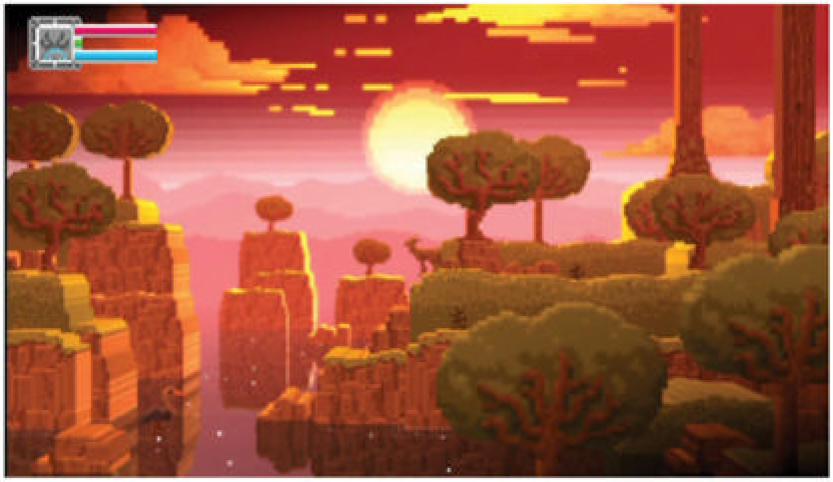


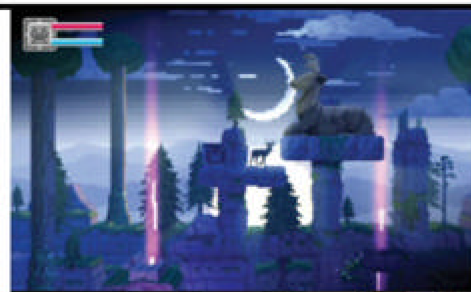


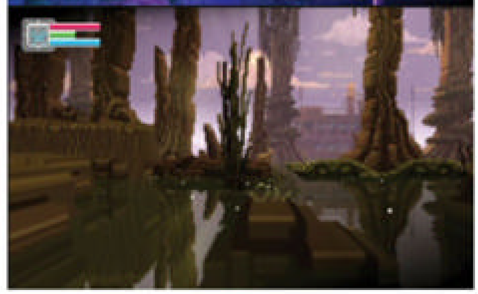
VERDICT 8/10

PROOF THAT NOT ALL GAMES NEED TO INNOVATE TO BE WORTH IT

Right: Those spikes, red from the blood of their victims, are ubiquitous and irritating, but can be useful. If swarmed by too many predators, it's often most effective to run and let them chase you until they inevitably fall.







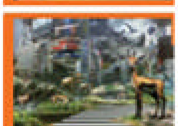
DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Mac, Linux
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Crescent Moon Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £10.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2 Online
MINIMUM SPEC: 1.4 GHZ Dual Core, 1 GB RAM, Intel HD Graphics 4000
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

FUNK OF TITANS





TOKYO JUNGLE

WORSE THAN

SAVE US

The Deer God

***The Deer God* is unfortunate proof that what's true for books and covers also goes for games and graphics.** Its pixel art is gorgeous, naturalistic environments in parallax layers with light streaming through the treetops. It's stunning. But, aside from that and the music, the only real reason to recommend *The Deer God* is its premise: you're a dead deer hunter reincarnated by the Deer God as a deer.

While the idea of experiencing life as one's victims is powerful, unfortunately, that's not really what *The Deer God* is going for. The normal deer-like activities – running, jumping, eating, growing, even reproducing – are the most enjoyable, and a game that conveyed a message through those could have been stronger, but *The Deer God* suffers from wanting to be A Real Game and has subsequently ended up a real mess.

Because this is a 2D platformer, it's filled with traditional platformer features: crumbling platforms, spikes, lava. Real Games have combat, you see, so an inordinate amount of predators want to kill you on sight. You can fight, initially by charging and then later with abilities unlocked by "solving" simple block-pushing "puzzles", but success depends more on your current size than on skill.

The inventory system is mostly pointless. Selecting these single-use items, like one that releases bees to attack foes, is too fiddly for a tight spot. Only the bouncy toadstools are really useful, for obstacles too high to jump over when only a fawn, but you can't guarantee you'll have one. Your general goal is to help other deer and humans (except hunters; kill those), usually with fetch quests. You run and jump right through repeated chunks of environment until you find an NPC, briefly interact, and then continue on to the next. It's just dull, especially given how likely you are to miss a jump because of a passing tree in the foreground and fall to your death.

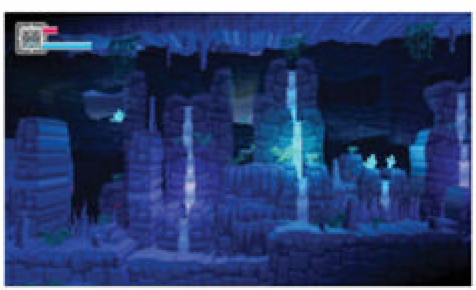
AN INORDINATE AMOUNT OF PREDATORS WANT TO KILL YOU ON SIGHT

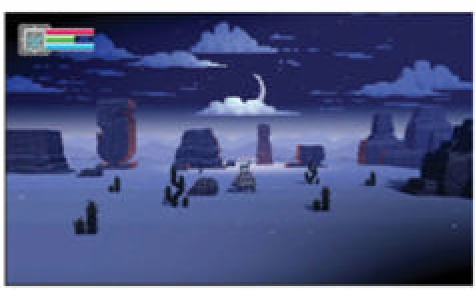
WORLDWIDE
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

DEER FRIEND: Online co-op is similar to single-player, but with two deer instead of one. You can't really work together, so it's more about how long you can play before both die.

The Deer God attempts to give meaning to death but fails to deliver. A karma system punishes you for killing friendly animals with reincarnation as something weak, which is interesting in theory but in practice just leaves you as a porcupine stuck in a hole, waiting to die of starvation. Usually, you come back as a fawn, either one you've created with a passing doe (if you managed to reach adulthood) or – unless playing in Hardcore mode – at a checkpoint.

So it's difficult to know exactly what message *The Deer God* is trying to convey with these systems. It seems somewhat hypocritical to punish you for killing deer by encouraging you to kill other animals, even if they are predators. What about the circle of life? Perhaps the point is to make you feel sorry for the deer, by showing you how rubbish it is to be one. In that, if in little else, it succeeds.





VERDICT 4/10
BEAUTIFUL BUT BORING, A FAILED EXPERIMENT


CHILLOUT GAMES
we value your games
www.chilloutgames.co.uk/SellGames.aspx
review centre
1st
since 2005
We Pay:
£26.46
£158.04
£31.33
£15.05
£33.28
£28.84
-RAPID PAYMENT
-GREAT PRICES
-FREE COURIER
WANTED
SECOND HAND
win prizes
facebook
Prices valid as at 26th March 2015. Prices subject to change on a daily basis. Chillout Games and retro-games.co.uk are trading names of Chillout Games Ltd. Prices are for shop credit - 12% more than PayPal. T&Cs at www.chilloutgames.co.uk.


retro gaming cables.co.uk
Quality audio video cables made in Great Britain
RGB SCART Cables available for:
• Sega Mega Drive 1 & 2
• Nintendo SNES (PAL & NTSC)
• SNK Neo Geo AES & CD/CDZ
• BBC Acorn Micro
• Sinclair ZX Spectrum + 128k, +2 & QL
• Atari STF, STE & STFM
• Amstrad CPC 464
• Various Arcade Jamma Superguns (Sigma, Pana, CMVS etc)
Plus many more on our website
RGB SCART cable key features:
• Vast improvement over traditional RF, composite video and s-video
• Pixel clear RGB video
• Improved sound quality
• No more tuning
• SCART TV plug & Play
• Compatible with up-scaling units i.e. Framemeister Mini XRGB
Buy direct from www.retrogamingcables.co.uk/store
FREE UK Delivery

STEADY AS A ROCK

Dynasty Warriors 8: Empires

Solely on a technical level, *Dynasty Warriors 8: Empires* is a step backwards. Last year's *Samurai Warriors 4* set a new benchmark for Omega Force's Musou excursions but – in small bursts at the very least – this latest *Empires* spinoff calls the seriously slack Wii U port of *Warriors Orochi 3* to mind. That said, if you can stomach the return of outmoded pop-in and slowdown, you're in for a minor treat.

Empire Mode remains the centrepiece, and it still sees you slowly attempting to gain control of every single region of China through strategic invasion. The action sequences continue to deliver precisely what fans demand, but as in previous iterations of *Empires*, the real fun is had on the sidelines of battle. In addition to recruiting troops, building facilities and manipulating the people you govern, the Marriage system has now been embellished to allow you to conceive a single child with your partner. The child inherits a blend of its parents' abilities, and it only takes a couple of seconds to realise what an utterly genius concept it is; if only because it invites die-hards to fixate even more obsessively on future iterations.

The freshly spiffed battleground stratagems are probably the game's most enjoyable refinement, allowing you to wreak *Battlefield 4*-style environmental havoc on your foes. Not only can flood, flame and lightning-based disasters turn the tides for you, but they can also buffer the effects of some of your less fundamental attack stratagems. This certainly isn't the first videogame to allow you to blend lightning with aqua, but if any series could benefit from a brand new contingency-based skirmish system, it's *Empires*. The outcomes of such bouts are often totally thrilling.

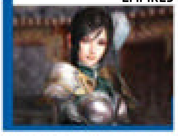
The perpetually fluctuating Fame mechanic from *DW7: Empires* has wisely been axed in favour of a much more traditional levelling system. This may sound like a regressive ploy, but it's simply an issue of control. The random nature of the Fame system meant that your status as principal supervisor was constantly being kneecapped by the algorithms of the game, whereas now, if your people choose to orchestrate a violent revolution, it's almost entirely because you opted to be lazy. The Fame system also, thankfully, no longer dictates which ending you get upon completion of the campaign.

The generous customisation suite now allows you to tinker with minions, banners and horses, and while the rather elementary Scenario Creator allows you to share your creations online, it is a mite tokenistic. In the end, significant alterations may be minor, but *Dynasty Warriors 8: Empires* is yet another canny elaboration of what continues to be a deeply beloved series of videogames.

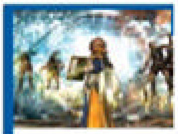
DETAILS

FORMAT: Playstation 4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Playstation 3, Xbox One
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Koei Tecmo
DEVELOPER: Omega Force
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN: DYNASTY WARRIORS 7: EMPIRES



AS GOOD AS: SAMURAI WARRIORS 4



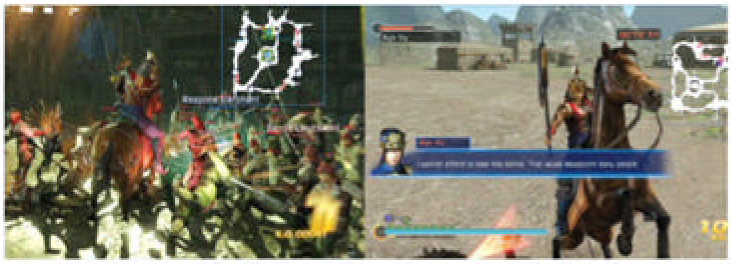
CONNECTED

EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

KNOW YOUR PLACE: You can no longer command officers that are higher in the chain of command than you are. A wise adjustment to an irritating and ludicrous system.

VERDICT 7/10

A MINOR EVOLUTION, BUT A HIGHLY ENJOYABLE ONE



Below: Local and online co-op now appears to be customary, and both work admirably well.





Above: The traditional in-game Encyclopaedia is as rigorously researched as fans have come to expect, featuring details of historic battles, a comprehensive glossary and a detailed timeline of the significant births, deaths and military crusades of the period.



Left: The new look is sure to appeal to a young audience, and features the characters as wind-up toys with hands that resemble those of a very famous brand of plastic construction toys…

A CLASSIC BATTLE WITH A MODERN TOUCH

Mario Vs Donkey Kong: Tipping Stars

Mario is back and this time, the most recognisable character in gaming has been redesigned and transformed into an unstoppable wind-up toy. He needs to be guided across treacherous platforms, ranging from factory floors to sizzling deserts. In a familiar scenario, it's up to you to save poor Mario, Peach, Toadstool and Pauline from spikes, evil monkeys, and – of course – fire-spewing flowers. Collect coins and companions to make it through and be rewarded with one, two or three stars depending on how fast you finish the level and the amount of coins. The more stars you gain, the more bonus levels you can unlock – all rather familiar really.

Despite being the sixth title in the *Mario Vs. Donkey Kong* series, *Tipping Stars* marks the first time a Nintendo game is available as a (eShop only) cross-buy as well as a cross-play. In an age of cloud storage and mobile gaming, this function is an excellent new step, and likely to make playing on Wii U more appealing. Available for download, it's an economical 2-for-1. It's an interesting move from Nintendo, and a curious choice of game for it. Despite the *Mario* series being Nintendo's undefeated crown jewel, this offering is hardly a huge release, signifying Nintendo might simply be dipping its toe in the waters of cross-platform gaming, using this instalment in as a careful experiment.

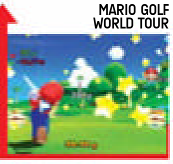
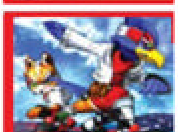
The shared platform approach might also be why the developers decided to forego adding 3D elements to the game, which is a shame. Despite being the feature that sets Nintendo's handheld apart, the 3D functionality doesn't make an appearance. The platform style and cartoonish design would have allowed for some experimentation in terms of 3D layering, and the timing couldn't have been better with the new 3DS XL just out. Additionally, the controls for the 3DS version are rather limited, relying solely on the touch screen (which gets fiddly at times) and rendering all other buttons practically useless. The trackpad gets a consolation prize in the form of the function to scroll through levels when they extend beyond the screen's borders. With all these functions going unused, gameplay seems to be geared more towards the Wii U player.

However, despite the limited gameplay, this game has more to offer than meets the eye. What would otherwise be a pretty bog standard platform game is elevated by the workshop option, where players can modify and create their own levels. You can choose to build from a pre-made template or to start from scratch. This, along with the price and the community section (where players can share levels, and scores), is where the game begins to redeem itself, and offers a little more than yet another instalment in a the *Mario Vs Donkey Kong* series.

VERDICT 7/10
LIMITED FUNCTIONALITY, BUT STILL PLENTY OF FUN

DETAILS

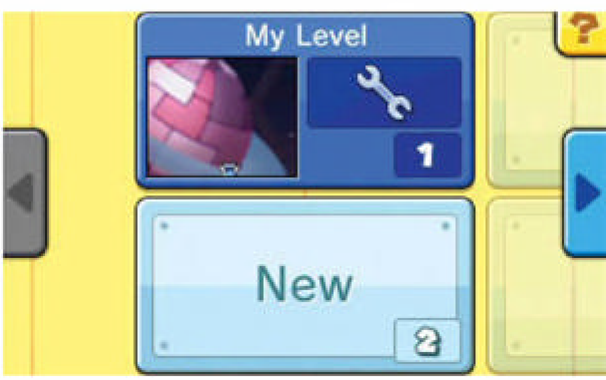
FORMAT: 3DS
OTHER FORMATS: Wii U
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £12.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
MARIO GOLF WORLD TOUR


SUPER SMASH BROS. 3DS
WORSE THAN

CONNECTED

EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

CROSS-PLAY: This is the first Nintendo game made available as a cross-buy and cross-play, meaning users purchasing the 3DS game can download it on their Wii U, and save their progress to both consoles.





Above: The Workshop feature lets users make their own levels, adding an interactive layer and making the game a lot more interesting.

A PUZZLER WITH A SHORT LIFE SPAN

Unmechanical Extended





Above: The art style is nice enough, but the gritty mechanical look doesn't work as well in 2.5D in this world as it does in *Machinarium*'s flat 2D version, which seems like a clear inspiration to this game.

It's nice to pay homage sometimes, to reflect on great experiences and pay tribute to them with a new creative endeavour, but it doesn't necessarily make for a great game. *Unmechanical* could hardly be called a clone or rip-off – that would be entirely unfair – but it doesn't shy away from making it apparent what games it was inspired by. And while its distillation of those ideas is entirely inoffensive, it doesn't make for anything all that inspiring.

As you work your way through this 2.5D world there are lots of really great games that come to mind. The structure has some of that classic metroidvania feel as you unlock new areas and backtrack through old. The use of lasers and energy ports as well as the decrepit landscape brings to mind *Portal*. And the art style feels very heavily influenced by *Machinarium*. All great games, packed with character and details, but *Unmechanical* isn't these games. It takes from them, but lacks their depth, personality or genuine challenge.

Purely on a genre level, it doesn't make for much of a puzzle game. As you hover around the world grabbing objects and unlocking areas, there's not a single brainteaser there that offers any great resistance. It all just seems rather apparent and that might be okay if the solving of these puzzles was driven by some strong narrative component or an immediate threat like *Portal* did so well, but that's not there. It's just the puzzles and a run-down world.

And the simplicity of it all wouldn't be so bad either, if it at least escalated over time or really mixed things up with new abilities or tricks as the game went on. That almost appears to have been acknowledged as you do unlock the ability to move underwater at one point, but that's it. That's the one significant upgrade your hovering robot attains and shortly thereafter the game's over anyway. You could easily blitz through this in under an hour, which is no great shame, but *Unmechanical* feels like it's teasing and promising so much by drawing from other great titles, you spend the entire time waiting for it to kick into the next gear.

Which doesn't come. What you get instead is an unsatisfying split-ending decision to make and it's all over. *Unmechanical* nods its head at deeper meaning and metaphor, but doesn't offer any in the end. The 'Extended' part of this version is an extra 20 to 30 minutes of additional campaign that carries a little more emotional impact, intimating at a robotic parent-child relationship, but it's over rather quickly. Nice enough, but not exactly groundbreaking.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS3, PS4, Vita
ORIGIN: Czech Republic
PUBLISHER: Grip Games, Talawa Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £7.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

AS GOOD AS

UNDERTOW





WORSE THAN

INSANELY TWISTED SHADOW PLANET

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

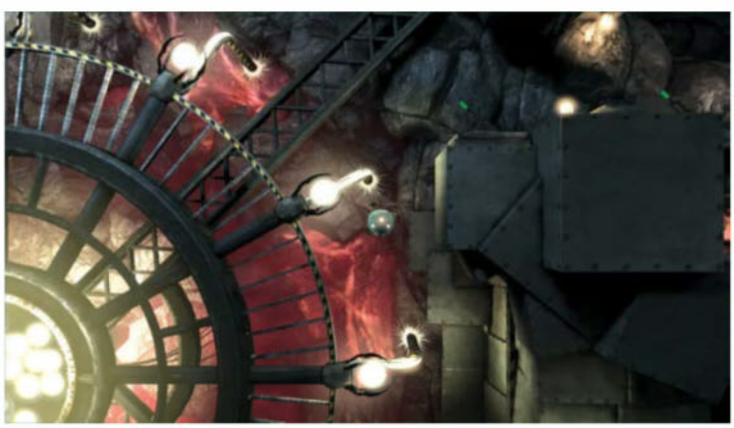
WHERE'S THE CHALLENGE?: Without really strong connecting tissue to make you want to get through the game, it needed its puzzles to be smarter or more involved. Moving orbs around gets old pretty fast.

VERDICT 5/10

A BUNDLE OF HOMAGES TO BETTER PRODUCTS

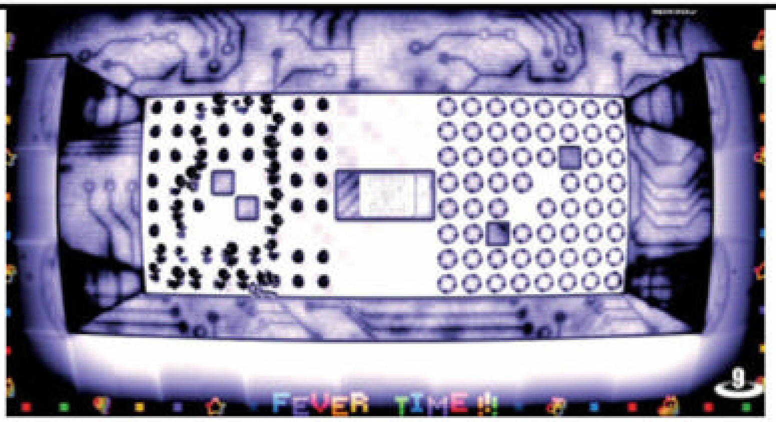
Below: The puzzles simply don't offer the level of challenge that's needed to keep you engaged. It either needed a tougher challenge or a more obvious narrative to keep you pushing through this world.





VERY COOL RUNNINGS

Pix The Cat



Above: Fever Time is your reward for getting big combos and perfect scores, but when it hits, it hardly feels like a prize. Causing Pix to run at lightning speed, controlling him at this time is a difficult but profitable task.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, Vita
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: Pastagames
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £6.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
MINIMUM SPEC: Processor: AMD/INTEL DUAL-CORE 2.2 GHZ
Memory: 2048 MB RAM

AS GOOD AS

PAC-MAN CHAMPIONSHIP EDITION



AS GOOD AS



TETRIS DS

When a game transforms your minutes into hours without you realising, you know you're onto a winner. *Pix The Cat* is a high-score title that does exactly that, luring you in with its brightly coloured levels and funky music, before trapping you in its vibrant world. Playing as the feline Pix, the game's major appeal comes from its Arcade mode, the place where high-score dreams are both made and broken, the premise being to first collect all the eggs, before dropping the hatched ducks into the target holes.

Choosing from the three Grids or the Daily, you'll go deeper and deeper into the nested levels as you play, with combos and perfect scores gaining you more points and a quicker Pix. The faster he goes, the harder getting it right is and with enemies trying to block you and the ducklings piling up the space, Arcade quickly becomes a testing examination of your reflex skills. Continually challenging, Arcade taps into your desire to be the best, while also offering you rewards for continually beating your previous scores, such as new modes, ghosts and voices.

Of the other two single-player modes, Laboratory provides the most interesting challenge, the aim being to drop the cells into the holes within a set number of moves. Testing your forward-thinking skills, Laboratory is a welcome change from the fast pace of Arcade, while Nostalgia, with its egg-count goal, is fun to play for a while, but doesn't quite manage to sustain the same long periods of captivity as the other two modes. A local multiplayer option also injects some competitive play to the game, but the objective it houses becomes boring.

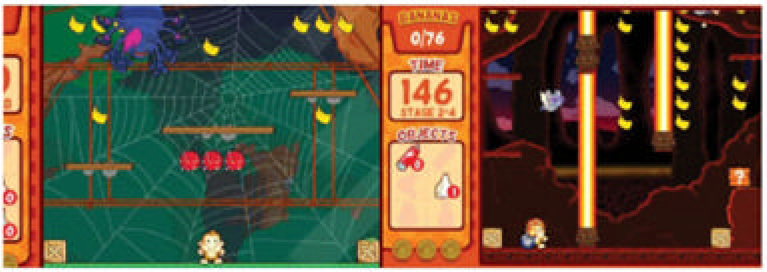
Pix The Cat's vivacious style and addictive substance makes it a high-score game to be played over and over again. A cross between *Pac-Man* and *Snake*, if you're looking for a some old-school arcade fun wrapped in new ideas then *Pix The Cat* is the one for you. Just be sure not to play before bed time.

VERDICT 8/10
HIGH-SCORE FUN AT ITS BEST

BANANAS IN THE MIDST

BABOON!

Below: Using bombs to defuse the danger of your surroundings is a method that you'll need to keep using if you want to survive. Ice bombs are particularly useful against lava ledges, ensuring your monkey friend keeps his fur intact.

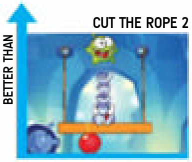


DETAILS

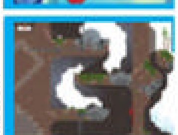
FORMAT: PS Vita
ORIGIN: Spain
PUBLISHER: Relevo Videogames
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £7.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

CUT THE ROPE 2



WORSE THAN



SUPER MEAT BOY

Frustratingly addictive is the best way to describe *Baboon!*, a puzzle platformer with a Japanese-inspired aesthetic and hidden depth beyond the cute smiles of furry protagonist Tumbili. Playing as the little monkey, you are sent on a quest to save your island Bananaville from the dastardly Pirate Baboon, gathering all the bananas he has suspended in the air in the process. On paper the game sounds simple, even childish, but don't be fooled, as *Baboon!* is a challenging yet rewarding experience.

Traversing through the game's seven worlds via a *Mario*-inspired timeline, in order to complete *Baboon!*'s 60 levels, you must reach each one's goal line, avoiding enemies and obstacles as you go. A feat that must be achieved unconventionally, projecting Tumbili anywhere but his immediate level is done by placing and detonating a bomb at his feet, the angle at which you place it determining where he ends up. On its own, this need for directional foresight is hard enough, but when put in a timed and ultimately dangerous environment – which you continually are, as well as an often moving one – this skill becomes much more difficult to master.

Leading to mistakes and many deaths, you find yourself back where you started more than once, quitting often looking like an inviting prospect. A game filled with both annoyance and great level design, in order to really appreciate it, *Baboon!* needs a player willing to persevere; someone willing to keep playing despite the setbacks. For those who keep going, the rewards are great. From the satisfaction of your bombs, to the joy of reigning in the *Sonic The Hedgehog*-style boss battles, *Baboon!* can be very gratifying.

Featuring side-quests, unlockables, secrets and quirky characters, *Baboon!* has more dimensions to it then meets the eye, and even though some side quests are tedious and the story is well presented but not greatly compelling, the creativity of this game's other aspects is impossible to ignore, as is its ability to constantly surprise you. An animalistic trip with a vibrant, nostalgia-laden style, *Baboon!* ticks a whole lot of our boxes.

VERDICT 7/10
REWARDINGLY FUN BUT NOT FOR THE EASILY FRUSTRATED

CALL THE ACROPOLIS

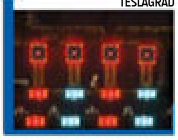
Apotheon

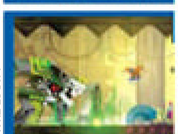
DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Alientrap
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £8.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

TESLAGRAD





GUACAMELEE

WORSE THAN

There's a very simple way of putting this: *Apotheon* is *God Of War* in 2D. With that, any effort we might've expunged detailing its intricacies can be saved, letting you bask in knowledge with only the smallest of sentences. That change in perspective hasn't done much to alter the gameplay, either; though it might not match the same over-the-top gore that Kratos embodies, it still maintains a similar form. You'll tackle a string of deities – their levels each themed on the powers that they control – ultimately taking their prized belongings and adding that strength to your own.

Those upgrades don't translate into complete new abilities or weapons, however, because that's where *Apotheon* does differ. Each weapon has its own damage, style and durability, so you'll be improvising often and claiming a lot of your equipment on the fly. There's an unusual physics system tying the combat together, too, a sort of puppet show battle arena that has enemies elaborately crumpling under the weight of a heavy mace or flinging backwards after the poke of a spear. It's finicky to control, making the game all the more original in that regard, but it will take a little practise to learn to play to its very specific tune. In truth it adds a little extra to *Apotheon*'s identity, which makes it all the more compelling when paired with its unique art style; though the Greek vase-painting style only ever really differs in hue, it's enough to create a sense of individuality in a genre that is so commonly painted in pixels.

Sadly *Apotheon* does lack the varied abilities common to the genre required to unlock new areas previously barred – in fact, the only restrictions on access is the lack of lockpicks or keys – and each area follows the exact same template. You'll need to hunt down certain enemies, defeat them and – in most cases – collect an item they drop. There isn't much imagination to the varying tasks you'll be handling, and a sad side-effect of its ragdoll combat means most boss fights will be fought in the same fashion as the last. While it never quite becomes a slog since the core gameplay does remain inventive enough to see you through to the end, it is an oversight that could've made *Apotheon* a truly standout title.

In the end, the positives do make it stand out, and as you begin to master the unique mechanics you'll find yourself inexplicably driven on. For *Apotheon* it's enough to have a supply of creatures, godly guardians and major deities to batter, and while our hero Nikandros may not have the rage of Sony's god of war, he at least has the Olympian strength to carry the weight of the comparison.

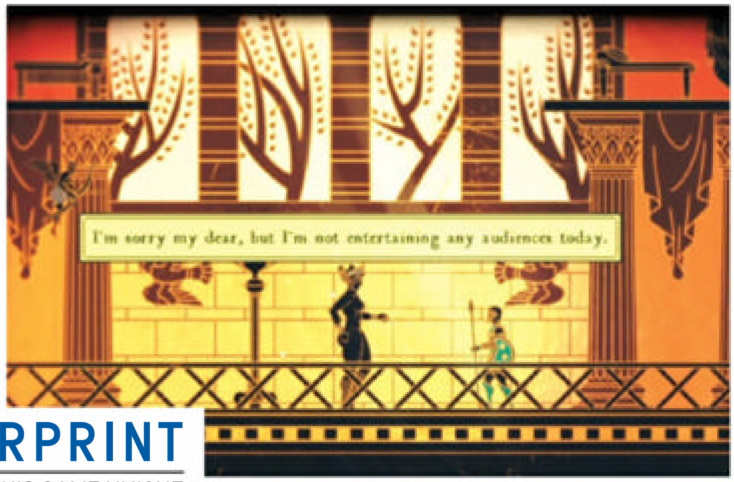
FINGERPRINT

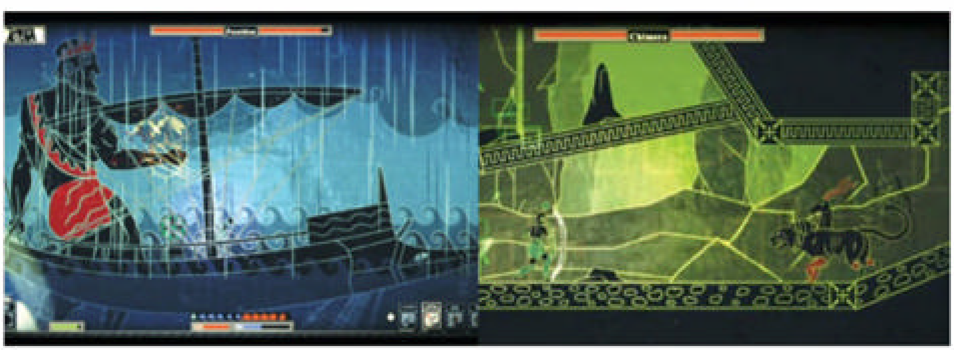
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

IT'S ALL GREEK: It might be obvious to point to the striking art style of *Apotheon* as its standout feature, but get to grips with the unique combat mechanics and you'll find that's what keeps you hooked.



Above: A game's art style should never be the sole reason to play it, but *Apotheon* has such a clever combination of setting and visuals that it's at least enough to draw you in. It's a surprise it hasn't been done before.





Above: There's a handful of boss fights throughout and they do differ in themes and mechanics, but your actions never really change.

VERDICT 8/10

AN INVENTIVE 2D BRAWLER THAT JUST OOZES PERSONALITY





Left: The environments are visually striking throughout, and some of the game's most impressive moments involve watching the world take shape around your actions and shifting perspectives. By simply moving around slowly, you can reveal hidden staircases, pathways and even floors.

A BREATH OF CRECHE AIR

Pneuma: Breath Of Life

Puzzle games, like perhaps no other genre, truly benefit from a sense of conceptual coherence, and *Pneuma* is a game that throws nothing but relentless curve balls at you. Simple switch puzzles are superseded by complex spatial awareness hoodwinkers, which in turn are followed by elaborate environmental riddles. It's a project made by a team of people clearly enamoured by the deeply flexible world they've created, but the experience is tantamount to chasing a bunch of hyperactive children around. Every time a ruleset is established, it is almost instantaneously discarded again.

Pneuma's introductory status as an Xbox One exclusive is a curious one, if only because the game has clearly been constructed around the forthcoming PC version's Oculus Rift support. The gameplay isn't exactly lost in translation without it, but a desire to relentlessly explore your environment isn't automatically a given. But your deep involvement is crucial: indispensable clues are contained in hidden corners of the world and in the meandering philosophical meditations of the script. Letting a clue slip past you sometimes makes it feel as if you've been abruptly slammed into an impenetrable brick wall. When the solution to a puzzle involves nothing more complicated than staring at an object for a specific period of time it's very easy to construe that confounding juxtaposition as poor design. The clues are always there, however, and if you're ever truly stuck, restarting at a previous checkpoint may be your smartest option.

The game's vague and benign narrative plays out via an almost ceaseless monologue; a bombardment of abstract metaphysical musings that's often brazenly nonsensical. Are you embodying the wandering imagination of a dead person? Or some sort of playful deity? Whatever you may be, this is a story that features so many questions that its lack of answers won't come as a great surprise, and the hurried climax feels like a timid cop out. This isn't a journey to a specific destination but an enigmatic daydream. Any desire to not judge it too harshly is hindered by the fact that you aren't able to just ignore the dialogue altogether.

Ultimately the haphazardness of *Pneuma* makes it difficult to fully engage with, though the unapologetic style of it is certain to resonate with some audiences, especially during an era in which puzzle games are petrified of being too taxing. *Breath of Life* will have its fervent champions, but it won't go supernova.

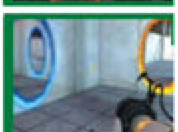
DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Bevel Studios, Deco Digital
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
MAGRUNNER: DARK PULSE



WORSE THAN
PORTAL



MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

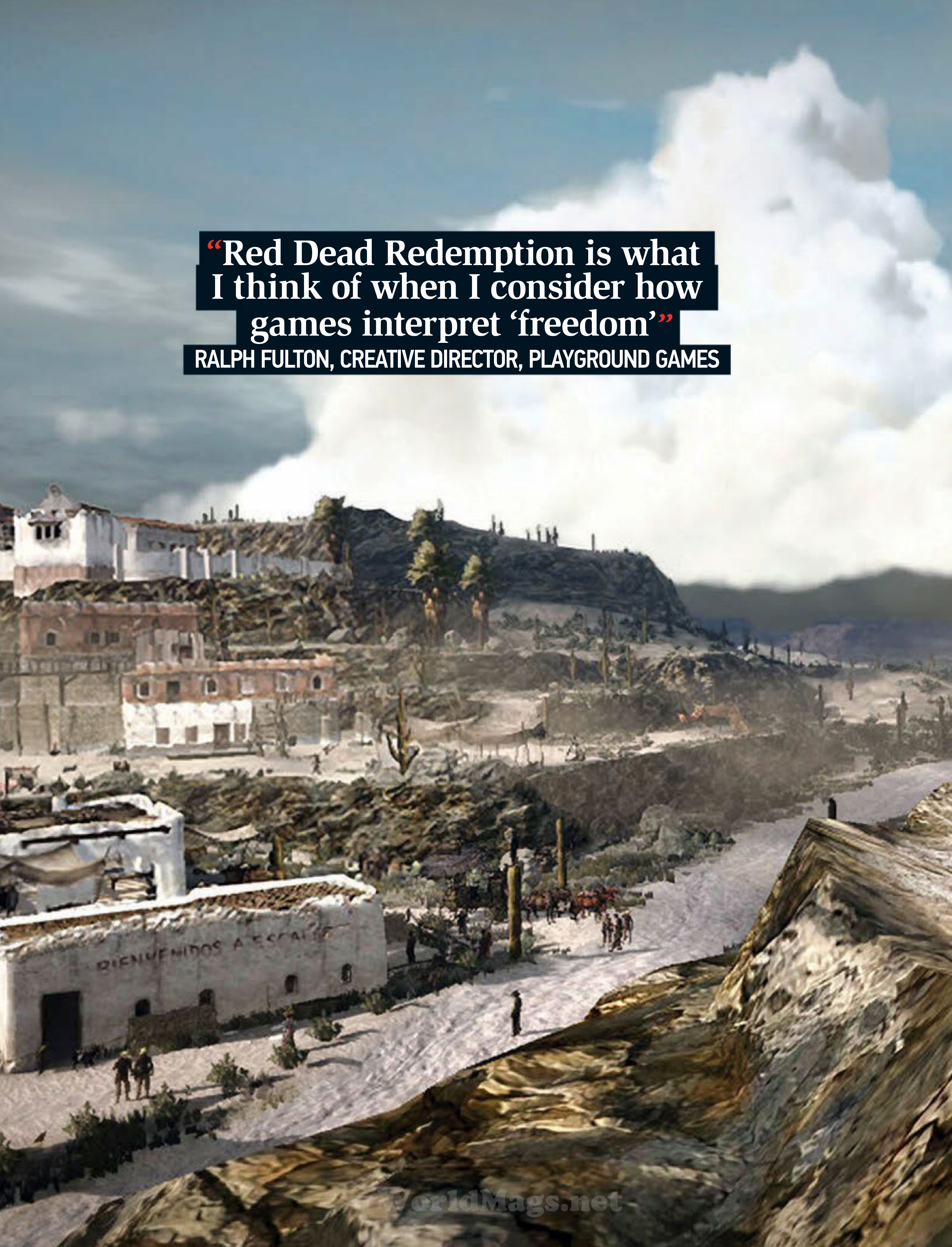
CONSTANT BANTER: Until you get stuck, the titular character's voiceover basically doesn't stop. A lot of what's said is clearly nonsense, but that doesn't mean that it doesn't get exhausting.

VERDICT 6/10
IMPERFECT BUT OCCASIONALLY THRILLING





Above: Although it hasn't been officially confirmed yet, Playstation 4 owners can probably expect to see *Pneuma* arrive on their consoles at some point later in the year.



> “Red Dead Redemption is what I think of when I consider how games interpret ‘freedom’”
>
> **RALPH FULTON, CREATIVE DIRECTOR, PLAYGROUND GAMES**



WHY I ♥...

RED DEAD REDEMPTION

RALPH FULTON, CREATIVE DIRECTOR, PLAYGROUND GAMES

“Red Dead Redemption *is one of my favourite games of last gen. I know that sounds mad with* GTA V *coming out and all that, but for me* Red Dead Redemption *is what I think of when I consider how games interpret ‘freedom’. We looked to that game [whilst developing* Forza Horizon 2*] to make sure we were getting it right, giving the player the freedom we wanted to give them. I love the universe, I love the characters, I love the gameplay. I’m sure there will be another one, and when there is, I’ll be the first in line.*”

Welcome back to the golden age



RETRO COLLECTIONS

Revisit the games, films, shows and hardware that defined entertainment for a generation

BUY YOUR COPY TODAY

Print edition available at www.imagineshop.co.uk

Digital edition available at www.greatdigitalmags.com

Available on the following platforms

Print Tablet Phone Desktop

facebook.com/ImagineBookazines twitter.com/Books_Imagine

RETRO

NO.159













DISCUSS | Have your say on all things retro on our dedicated forum **www.gamestm.co.uk/forum**

THE RETRO GUIDE TO... METAL SLUG™

Although it wasn't the first to popularise the run-and-gun genre, Metal Slug still plays a significant part in its evolution and deservedly so. **games™** revisits the popular series, charting its many hits and occasional misses



KONAMI MAY WELL have invented the idea of the run-and-gun with its excellent *Contra* series, but it was Nazca Corporation that arguably put the fun into it. Created by a team of ex-Irem programmers, *Metal Slug* made its debut in the arcades in 1996, utilising the same technology that powered SNK's powerful Neo Geo AES system. Such was its popularity that the series would have bi-annual sequels and run through a number of different developers in the process. Unlike many other popular game franchises, *Metal Slug* has rarely made dynamic changes to its core gameplay, seemingly content to concentrate on running-and-gunning while delivering the most sumptuous graphics and animation around. That's not to say that the odd game wouldn't deviate from the tried and tested formula, but for the most part it has always remained consistent, which is part of the reason why it has such a loyal fan base within the Neo Geo community. So join us, then, as we look at every single game in the main series and its numerous spin-offs and updates. How many have you played?



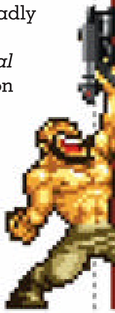
METAL SLUG 1996

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

There's a good reason why the original Neo Geo AES version of *Metal Slug* typically sells online for over £1,000. Even the most cynical gamer would be hard pushed to not enjoy *Metal Slug* when they see the sheer amount of love and care that's been poured into it. Players take control of either Captain Marco Rossi or Lieutenant Tarma Roving, two members of the Peregrine Falcon Strike Force who have been tasked with destroying General Morden and his rebel army. It's a flimsy premise, sure, but it's not the story that's the focus of *Metal Slug* – it's the sheer amount of pyrotechnics that take place as you storm through the game's six levels.

Although they start off with standard side pistols – and a knife for melee attacks – the pair soon gain access to some devastating weaponry that ranges from heavy machine guns to brutal, soldier-disintegrating shotguns. Power-ups are received by freeing the POWs that are found throughout each level, with additional bonus points being scored at the end of the level for any POWs still intact at the end. While the weapons are suitably over-the-top, the star of the game is the titular Metal Tank, a dumpy looking jumping weapon of mass destruction that's as deadly as it is cute to look at.

Despite the sheer amount of carnage that is unleashed in *Metal Slug*, it's immensely funny to play due to the staggering animation that is used to breathe life into every single enemy that you kill. Watching them vaporise in flames or comically dive off sinking ships is hilarious and it gives *Metal Slug* a personality that few other games possess. It's all polished off with some ridiculously brutal bosses and incredibly detailed destructible environments. Oh and before we forget, the Saturn and PlayStation versions featured an additional mode called "Combat School" that allowed you to revisit previous missions, but with brand new objectives.







METAL SLUG 2 1998

SYSTEM: NEO GEO

This was the first game to be developed by SNK and it's a bit of an odd one if we're honest. Graphically it's extremely similar to *Metal Slug* (hardly surprising due to being on the same hardware) but it's plagued by large amounts of slowdown.

This is a great shame because it greatly detracts from the sheer amount of extra goodies that SNK threw into its first standalone *Slug* game. Several new weapons have been added, including lethal lasers and crushingly powerful firebombs, while the Metal Slug has been joined by a number of other useful contraptions. The Slug Flyer is a VTOL jet fighter that will allow another player to fight from its wings, while the Slugnoid is an armoured monstrosity that's superb at jumping. Best of all however is the Camel Slug, which is amazing because it's basically a camel with giant Vulcan cannons mounted to it.

Metal Slug 2 swells the player roster to four by introducing Fio Germi and Eri Kasamoto and introduces a pair of characters who will help out players at certain sections of a level. There are also transformation effects that either turn you into a mummy or make you obese. While the latter is largely useless, being turned into a zombie allows you to attack enemies by throwing your head at them, which is rather handy. It also introduces a bonkers plot with General Morden forming an alliance with powerful aliens.





METAL SLUG X 1999

SYSTEM: NEO GEO

Realising that it had done fans a disservice with *Metal Slug 2*, SNK remixed the game, effectively creating a director's cut that fixed all the slowdown problems found in the 1998 original. While it's basically the same game, it introduces a large number of differences that range from changing the time of day that some levels take place in to offering upgraded variations of the game's weapons. Speaking of weapons, a number of new ones are also introduced, including one that fires mechanical exploding creatures at your opponents. Bosses have also been upgraded and are far more challenging. Players can become obese on every level of the game instead of just in the single level from *Metal Slug 2*, while there are a number of new enemies in the game as well. The general layout of enemies and environmental destruction has also been switched around, ensuring the game feels completely fresh, even if you've clocked the original countless times.

METAL SLUG 1ST MISSION 1999

SYSTEM: NEO GEO POCKET

The first portable *Metal Slug* game is a cracking spin-off that proved the series could work equally well on SNK's less powerful handheld. Unlike the home versions, it's only single-player, and the graphics have been greatly toned down (although they still exhibit much of the franchise's humour). You also have a life bar, which makes things much easier as *1st Mission* is surprisingly tough in places. It's also far less linear than other games in the series, with numerous missions that alternate between battling on foot and more conventional shoot-'em-up levels, thus ensuring the gameplay never gets boring. The selection of available weapons is satisfying, but there are far less vehicles than in previous games. It may feel scaled down in some aspects, but the sheer amount of multiple routes to uncover and a second player to unlock ensures that *1st Mission* has plenty of replay value.









METAL SLUG 3 2000

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Metal Slug 3 is widely regarded as the best game in the series, an accolade it clearly deserves. It takes the hardcore action of the earlier games, but expands on it, following the design ethos that more is definitely better. The plot is still incredibly nonsensical, and sees Marco and Tarma (who have both been promoted) teaming up with Morden to defeat the aliens who were introduced in *Metal Slug 2*.

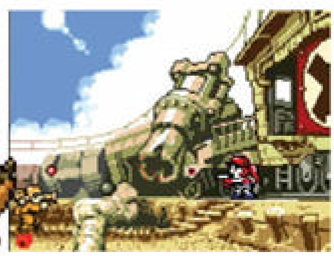
There are an insane number of new slugs in *3*, including an elephant, ostrich and Slug Copter. The weapons have also been overhauled, and now include a couple of secret weapons, like a nanobots-powered thunder cloud and a deadly mobile satellite. Marco and Tarma can transform into a number of new forms, allowing them to tackle water and even space, while branching levels ensure that there are plenty of reasons to return to the game once you finally complete it.

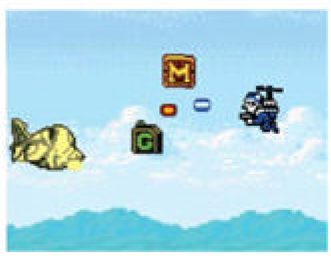
Metal Slug 3's success saw it ported to numerous systems over the years, but the PS2 and Xbox versions are particularly notable as they both include two additional mini-levels, "Storming The UFO Mothership" and the rather brilliant "Far Island" that sees you trying to consume as much food as possible. It's the last main *Metal Slug* game from SNK and it's rather telling that later games never managed to emulate its success. Oh and did we mention you can rescue an ape that wields double heavy machines guns? Well you can.

THERE ARE AN INSANE NUMBER OF NEW SLUGS IN 3, INCLUDING AN ELEPHANT AND SLUG COPTER

METAL SLUG 2ND MISSION 2000

SYSTEM: NEO GEO POCKET COLOR





Everything about SNK's miniature sequel dramatically improves on the already enjoyable original. Graphically, it's superb, with slick animation and far better sprites than *1st Mission*. It adds the "Sub Slug", introduces new characters and boasts far slicker presentation that mirrors the earlier "Combat School" mode found in the various *Metal Slug* home conversions. It adds additional weapons, including the spread gun and flamethrower and adds the aliens that were so important to *Metal Slug 3*'s plot. There's little that's truly new, but it's a substantially bigger game than its predecessor, and once again proves that the Neo Geo Pocket Color was a perfectly capable handheld in the right hands.







MOBILE SLUGS

As with many classic franchises, a number of *Metal Slug* games have been released on mobile phones over the years. *Metal Slug Mobile* is nothing more than a cut-down version of the original Neo Geo Pocket game and was followed by numerous sequels. While they look nice, the animation is woefully poor and the controls are a nightmare. Games like *Metal Slug Warriors* and *Metal Slug Gaiden* introduce new characters, but all suffer from the same fiddly controls, something that *Metal Slug: Mars Panic* is also hampered by. The first three games along with *Metal Slug X* have also been ported to iOS and Android, but again, they suffer the same control issues, even though they are nigh-on identical to the arcade originals. Touch controls are a tricky business.



THE STORY LOSES THE WACKINESS OF PAST GAMES, REVOLVING AROUND A PLOT ABOUT A MAD SCIENTIST



METAL SLUG 4 2002

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

If *Metal Slug 3* is the best game in the main series, then this disappointing effort from Mega Enterprise is arguably the weakest. Tarma and Eri are replaced by two new characters, Nadia and Trevor. Trevor is best avoided as he stops moving during melee attacks momentarily, which becomes more than a little annoying, particularly when the action picks up.

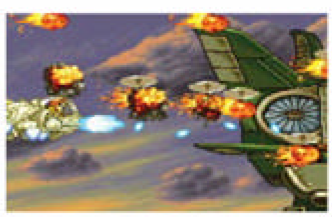
The story loses the wackiness of past games, revolving around a bland plot concerning a mad scientist, while the new weapons are limited to just a double heavy machine gun (although it is satisfying to use). Interestingly, several enemy vehicles from past games are now usable, while certain stages see you transform into a monkey who's blessed with better jumping abilities, but can only use a weedy gun.

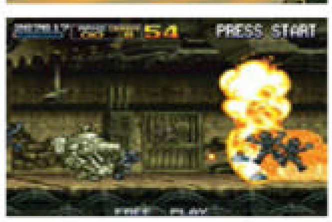
The most interesting addition to the game is a new combo system that gives you a set amount of time (based on the emblem you picked up) to score as many points as possible. It adds a much-needed layer of strategy to the series, but doesn't excuse the recycled ideas and visuals that have been used throughout the game.

METAL SLUG 5 2003

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Although Morden and his army are nowhere to be seen, *Metal Slug 5* is a far more conventional *Metal Slug* game. There are no aliens or undead, the fun combo system from *4* has been removed, while there are very little reused graphics from earlier games. New to the series is a rather handy slide-dash, which makes certain sections of the game far easier to manage. Branching paths make their return – although only on stages one and three – while a number of new vehicles have been added, with the many-legged "Spider Slug" being a particular favourite. Although it features stunning looking locations and some really impressive animation, it still lacks the punch of the early games.



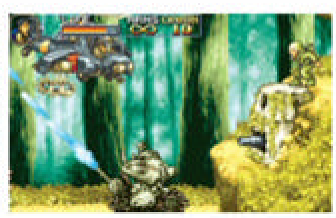




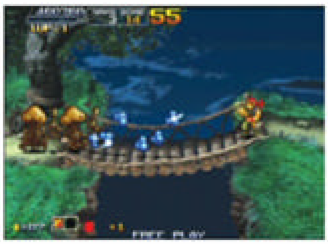
METAL SLUG ADVANCE 2004

SYSTEM: GAME BOY ADVANCE

Metal Slug Advance introduces two new characters, recruits Walter Ryan and Tyra Elson and a number of new gameplay mechanics. Like *Metal Slug 1st Mission*, *Advance* uses a life bar, which can be refilled by picking up pieces of food. It also adds card collecting into the mix. Although some will simply give you info on items and characters in the game, others will enhance your character's stats and even unlock new Slugs. It does a great job of capturing the style of the earlier games, but animation is stilted and the small screen means it's too easy to take unwanted hits. It's also lacking in stages, with only five in total. The card collecting admittedly adds some longevity, but it lacks the depth of the Neo Geo Pocket games.







METAL SLUG 6 2006

SYSTEM: ARCADE, PLAYSTATION 2

■ *Metal Slug 6* was something of a return to form as it saw SNK Playmore again creating the game for arcades. As a result it shares more in common with *Metal Slug 3* than the previous games, while still adding plenty of new features. One of the biggest changes is that there are now six characters to choose from, with Ralf Steel and Clarke Jones joining the fray. Interestingly, both characters are from *Ikari Warriors*, one of SNK's earlier run-and-gun games from the Eighties. Each character is also notably different from the rest, and can now carry and swap between two weapons, which adds an additional layer of strategy to proceedings. It's also possible to throw away a weapon in order to give it to another player and get ahold of a powerful new sword, which greatly enhances a character's melee attacks. The plot is still batshit crazy, and sees our heroic troop teaming up with both Mordon and the aliens to defeat a new threat of underground creatures. Graphically, *Metal Slug 6* is something of a mixed bag. While the bosses and characters benefit from the extra graphical grunt of the Atomiswave hardware, the actual level design is rather bland and boring and it lacks the character of the first three games.



METAL SLUG 3D 2006

SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION 2

■ *Metal Slug 3D* hasn't got the greatest of reputations, which is a shame as it's nowhere near as bad as people think. Yes there's no denying that the polygon models lack the timeless appeal of the earlier sprites, but they're still well animated and do at least capture the essence of the earlier games.

It introduces several new things to the series, including cute cutscenes (which are all in English) and a third-person viewpoint. Most of the included weapons will automatically lock on to nearby enemies, which at least allows it to capture the satisfying gunplay of the earlier games. Less impressive, however, are the levels themselves, which are often too big and devoid of the pace found in the 2D games. Another new addition to the series are on-rail sections for when you are in vehicles. They work fairly well but add little substance to the already sluggish gameplay. By far the biggest issue with *Metal Slug 3D* is its difficulty, which is hard even for a *Metal Slug* game. Stick with it for a great challenge.

AN INTERVIEW WITH KAZUMA KUJO



So, tell us about *Metal Slug*'s origins.
The plan to make a 'shooting game' had already been decided, but also, at the same time, I had decided to make a game for two people who could play simultaneously. However, I did not like that in shooting games there was forced scrolling, so the screen would just keep on moving even if one of the players was out of the game. Also, most shooting games were set in outer space, and I wanted to make something different.

Was anything dropped from the final game?
In order to create and release one game, tons of ideas or designs are born and destroyed. In the first title, there was a stage [on which] we had to redraw almost half of the background graphic because it ended up not matching our direction as development progressed.

Where did you get inspiration for art style?
Oh, there were definitely other influences. We were very much inspired by Hayao Miyazaki's book, *Daydream Note*.

Why did you focus on the Neo Geo AES system?
We were making games for game centres – or arcades, as you call them – when we were in Irem. So that is why we made games for Neo Geo at Nazca, since that was the hardware of game centres.

How long did it take to create the gorgeous sprites?
Our artists took quite a long time and worked very hard to make the graphic designs. However, we made the 2D animations for those graphics at a menacing speed. We needed a lot of energy to make them, but we made those graphics much quicker than you imagine.

What particular thing do you like about *Metal Slug*?
I like the fact that the central characters, the soldiers, can only shoot directly upward and not diagonally. We spent a lot of thought on this, and I believe this is the way to do an action shooter!



METAL SLUG 7 2008

SYSTEM: NINTENDO DS

Metal Slug 7 is the first main game in the series to not receive an arcade port first. It's also the first main *Metal Slug* game to not support a second player, which is rather baffling when you consider *Contra 4* managed it perfectly well on the same system.

Despite this odd omission, *Metal Slug 7* remains an enjoyable addition to the series and while it lacks the sheer playability of the first three games, it dramatically improves upon entries *4* and *5*. There are a number of difficulty levels (including one that starts you off with a heavy machine gun) the "Combat School" returns and all six characters from *Metal Slug 6* are available. The DS's second screen utilises a map feature to show where items are, while three new Slugs make an appearance. The bosses may lack the punch of earlier mayors, but they are still well designed, while the animation throughout is up to the typical standard of the series. It's slowly going up in price as well, so may be worth tracking down.

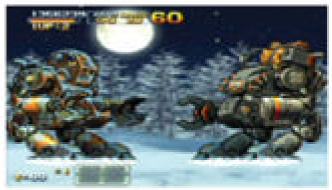




METAL SLUG XX 2009

SYSTEM: PSP

Like *Metal Slug X*, *Metal Slug XX* is another director's cut, this time of *Metal Slug 7*. Released originally for PSP, and later on Xbox Live Arcade, the most obvious difference is the much welcome addition of multiplayer. There's plenty more to discover though, including the addition of Leona Heidern as a downloadable character, new Combat School missions, alternate and hidden routes, a higher difficulty level and infinite continues.





METAL SLUG TOUCH 2009

SYSTEM: iOS

Metal Slug Touch was only released in Japan and it's already been withdrawn from the App Store, meaning many won't have had a chance to experience it. It's a pretty poor effort due to the use of touch controls and it's lacking in levels, with only four available. It's also the first game in the series where you only ever control the Metal Slug or the Slug Flyer. It's a highly disappointing release that lacks many of the elements that make the *Slug* games so good.

METAL SLUG DEFENCE 2014

SYSTEM: iOS

Ironically, the most successful *Metal Slug* game – 20 million downloads and counting – isn't a traditional *Metal Slug* game at all. Finally realising the touch-based systems weren't suitable for its back catalogue, SNK Playmore has instead created a free-to-play tower defence game that combines all the humour and slick animation of the series with lots of odious micro-transactions. The game itself is actually surprisingly playable with the aim being to take down your opponent's bunker before they destroy yours. AP continually builds up which you can then use to unlock a variety of characters from the series. When they turn blue you can tap on them to unleash special attacks and even summon a Metal Slug that will do huge damage to anything it hits. Like many free-to-play games there's an obvious benefit on stumping money upfront, but you can make a surprising amount of progress if you don't mind grinding. Our only real concern is its success stops SNK from making a proper *Metal Slug 8*.






wip3out

BEHIND THE SCENES

WIP3OUT

It may not have flown off the shelves but Wip3out was the best of the games in the franchise to hit the PlayStation. games™ discovers how it was made



Released: 1999
Format: PlayStation
Publisher: Psygnosis
Key Staff: David Jefferies (programmer), Wayne Imlach (lead design), Nicky Wescott (lead graphics), Gary McKill (music and sound), Alan Raistrick (producer)

WHAT IS IN A NAME? Quite a lot, if that name happens to be *WipEout*, the fast-moving, futuristic racer that had hearts pulsating and fingers twitching upon its debut in 1995. Canny marketing by The Designers Republic and its unique in-game styling produced a game that transcended a still-young, nerd-labelled industry. In doing so, it put *WipEout* centre stage in bleeding-edge nightclubs and the rave-infested underground culture, ensuring the game pulled in sackfuls of dollars.

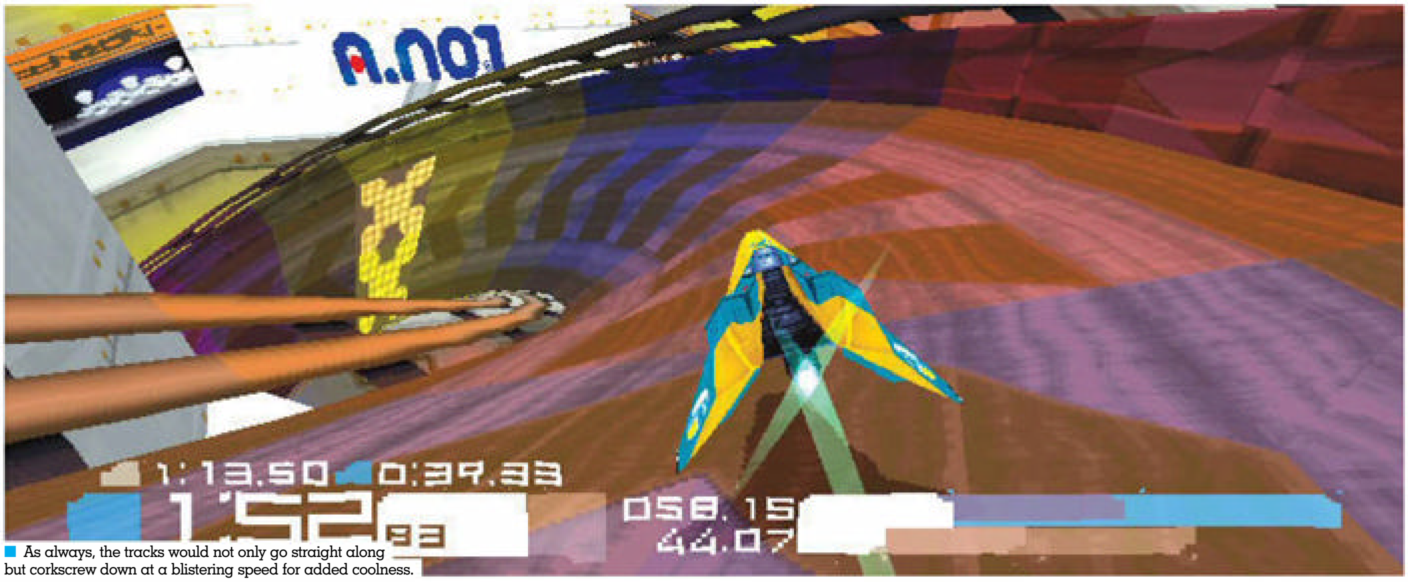
In 1999, some three years after the sequel *WipEout 2097*, developer Psygnosis, which was by now under Sony ownership, decided to revisit the game as a PlayStation exclusive. It fiddled with the name by reversing the letter E to produce a number 3 for the European version – thus creating *Wip3out* – but the game wasn't the third in the series. It was the fourth. The third had been a Nintendo 64 exclusive put out a year earlier called *Wipeout 64*. "It was seen as more of a hybrid of *WipEout* & *WipEout 2097* rather than a standalone in its own right, even though it introduced a bunch of game features unique to the N64 version, which found themselves used in later iterations," says *Wip3out* lead designer Wayne Imlach.

The success of *Wipeout 64* showed how popular the franchise had remained among gamers but the team working on *Wip3out* at Psygnosis' Leeds studio was afforded very few luxuries. It was hit with both a tight schedule and a small budget because Sony needed the game to be released before gamers gave up on the PlayStation and moved to the PS2. But for many of those involved, the opportunity was too good to pass and so they threw themselves into the task in hand with great focus.

As if to underline how tight the schedule was, the team had just nine months to get the game on to shop shelves (it was sold as *WipEout 3* in the US). "It was a very quick turnaround for a game, even considering that we had a solid foundation to start with in the previous title, *2097*," says Imlach. "Because of this, we had to be careful about features – anything too new or untried would be high risk and we couldn't afford to slip much. So the innovations were small, and the focus was put on refining what already existed. The team was also quite small relative to other games."

The first task for the team was to identify any niggles that had emerged with past games in the franchise and right them. The main problem with the very first game was its difficulty, an issue that saw a great many gamer fail to progress further than a couple of tracks before throwing their joypad down in anger at yet another stalled run. "The first game was seminal and groundbreaking, but a little rough round the edges particularly with unforgiving ship handling," says programmer David Jefferies. To address this, Imlach says the game balance was evened up, giving it a "shallower progression" than the previous games, "Yet retaining the insane skill requirements at the highest levels."

Rather than write the game from scratch, the team took *WipEout 2097* as its starting point, pulling out a development version of that game so that it had something to work on almost immediately. Imlach headed up a team of three level designers and his job was to redesign the game's basic elements and manage the circuit design and optimisation of the



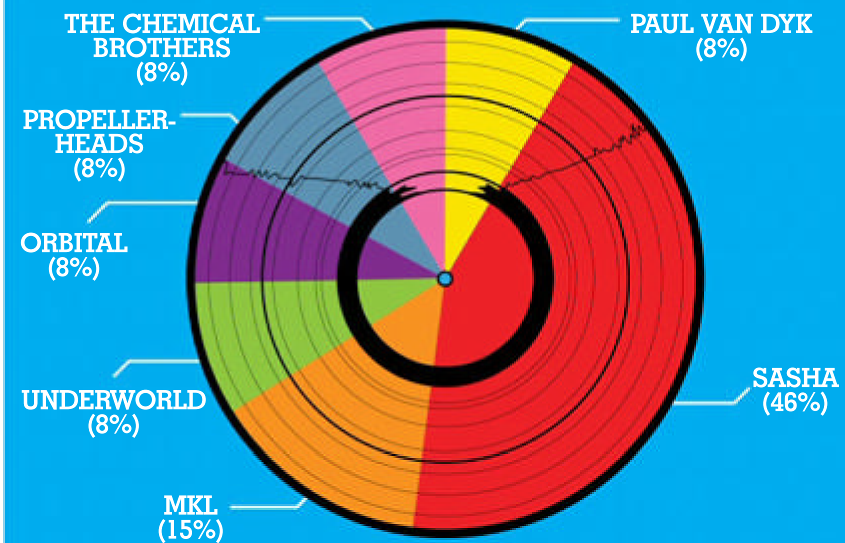
As always, the tracks would not only go straight along but corkscrew down at a blistering speed for added coolness.

LISTEN UP

DJ Sasha seized control of the music on Wip3out

THE *WIPEOUT* SERIES had already gained a reputation for its musical excellence, drawing upon the underground rave culture, which gripped the UK at that time.

With *Wip3out*, DJ Sasha was asked to oversee the soundtrack and, so confident was the game's developer that people would want to listen to the tunes, the game's CD could even be played in a standard CD player. "The music was more cohesive – I think getting a single individual to mix and direct the various compositions gave the game a more focused track list, without sacrificing the techno/club soundtrack that defined the series," says lead designer Wayne Imlach on this revolutionary decision.



SASHA – Sasha was the musical director on *Wip3out* and he dominated the game's audio, contributing no fewer than six of the 13 tracks including *FEISAR, Icarus, Auricom, Goteki 45, Pirhana* and *Xpander.* He also headlined a club tour of the USA sponsored by developer Psygnosis. He told music paper *NME* at the time: "The series has always had a huge underground following – I'm certain that the crossover between the people who listen to my music and those who enjoy games like *WipEout* is enormous."

MKL – With two dance tunes – *Surrender* and *Control* – MKL's decision to switch from being a drummer to the producer of electronic music certainly paid off.

UNDERWORLD – This British electronic group had its origins in the Eighties, but it was hugely popular in the mid-Nineties thanks to the success of *Born Slippy*, a tune made famous thanks to the Danny Boyle classic movie *Trainspotting*. Underground contributed *Kittens* to *Wip3out*.

ORBITAL – Brothers Phil and Paul Hartnoll made up the dance music duo Orbital, which recorded *Know Where To Run* for *Wip3out*. Paul must have been struck by the opportunity because, following the break-up of Orbital, he went on to record tracks for the 2005 game *Wipeout Pure* on the PSP.

PROPELLERHEADS – This big-beat musical ensemble had already included the song *Bang On!* for *Wipeout 64*, so giving *Lethal Cut* to *Wip3out* was something of a natural progression.

THE CHEMICAL BROTHERS – No strangers to the *WipEout* franchise, The Chemical Brothers had allowed *Chemical Beats* to be used on the first game. *Wip3out* saw the inclusion of the tune *Influence* as well.

PAUL VAN DYK – German electronic dance music DJ Paul van Dyk is no stranger to videogames today, having produced tunes for *FIFA, Need For Speed, DJ Hero, Grand Slam Tennis, Mirror's Edge* and more, but his first taste of a gaming soundtrack came with *Avenue* on *Wip3out*.

game. His team was not only able to make use of a set of recently released PlayStation code optimisation utilities, but they were also able to draw on years of experience that had given them a strong insight into how far they could potentially take the PSOne.

"We felt we could really push the technical envelope of what was possible on the PlayStation, adding some features that were missing, giving the visuals a complete overhaul from The Designer's Republic but keeping to the values of the franchise so that fans of the previous games wouldn't feel alienated by the new game," says Jefferies. Imlach agrees. "One of the advantages of developing for a mature system is the refinement that comes from knowing the hardware inside out, hence the hi-res without a sacrifice of frame rate which is something that wasn't possible with the earlier iterations."

As with the previous versions of *WipEout*, the game was written first and foremost for PAL PlayStations running at 25 frames per second. It was then converted for a NTSC audience at 30fps. A side effect of this, says Jefferies, was that the NTSC versions of the game ran a little quicker at the expense of slightly lower resolution, but because the game didn't perform any timing conversions, the race clock ran faster on the NTSC version. "This explains why your race times are 20 per cent faster than your American friends," he exclaims.

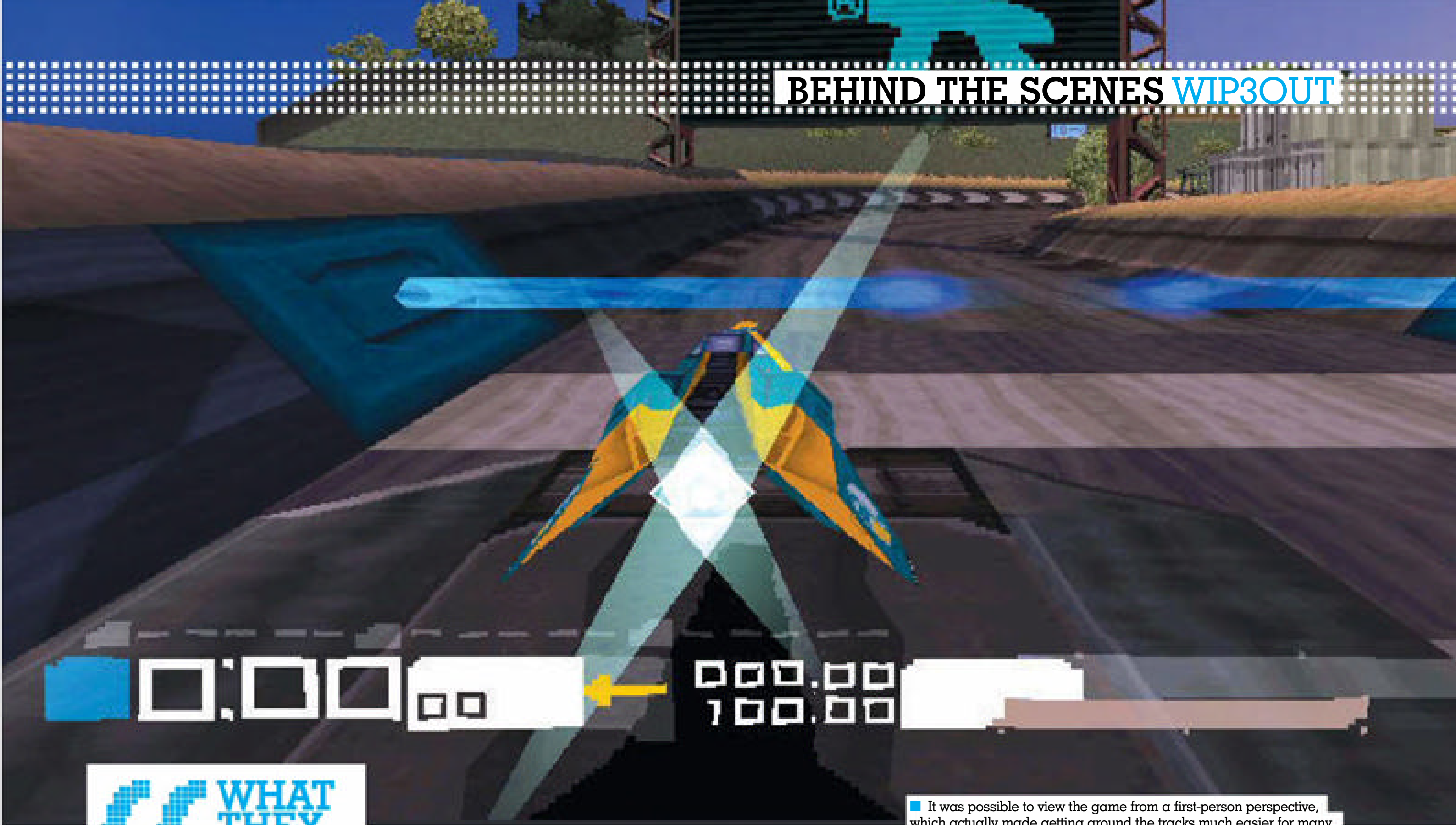
But the team was also keen on using aspects of the PlayStation that development teams had previously avoided. "One of our priorities was using the PlayStation's hi-def and widescreen mode which, up to that point, had been considered unusable by development teams," explains Jefferies. "By optimising the renderer we were able to increase the resolution of the game from the standard 256 x 240 to 512 x 256, which made for a much crisper image."

An interesting side effect of running the game in a widescreen 512 x 256 was that the technique allowed for the rendering of two perfectly square split screens side-by-side rather than the usual top and bottom. Each split screen was therefore 256 x 256, "Or to put it another way, they were both the same resolution as single screen *Wipeout 2097* and running on the same hardware. Impressive stuff," enthuses Jefferies.

The split-screen functionality allowed for one-TV multiplayer, an advance on the original version that required players to connect two PlayStations via



The graphical boundaries of the PlayStation were pushed with *Wip3out*, producing a game that was both high-res and fast.



It was possible to view the game from a first-person perspective, which actually made getting around the tracks much easier for many.

WHAT THEY SAID...



WipEout 3 is the most difficult and intense racing game I've played. A powerful effort from Psygnosis' Leeds studio

Gamers' Republic, 1999



a serial cable in order to play against friends. "The drawback with the old system was that you needed two tellies, two PlayStations and two copies of the game – all in one room, which limited the number of people who could experience it, especially given the weight of old CRT tellies back then – they were not easy to carry around your friend's house," Jefferies exclaims humorously.

But bringing this mode to the game posed problems of its own. Taking a game that wasn't designed for split screen and adding it is a major undertaking because the console needs to render two views when the game is optimised to run at exactly 30fps in one view. "With split-screen the game is still rasterising the same number of pixels as a single screen but it needs to transform twice the number of polygons into 3D space before doing the rasterising," says Jefferies.

Yet the *Wip3out* team managed to crack the issue with a few optimisation tricks to improve the speed. "Ships in the distance would be rendered at a lower polygon resolution than ones nearby," Jefferies adds. "Seeing as the polygon count of the ships was fairly small anyway, this meant they turned into little wedges of cheese in the mid-distance but with all the carnage going on you rarely noticed.

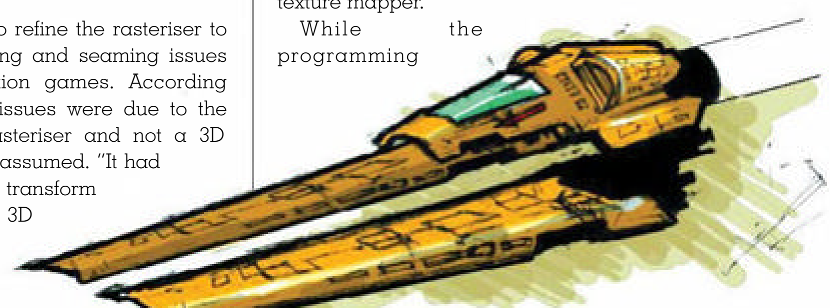
The team was also able to refine the rasteriser to eliminate the polygon clipping and seaming issues that had plagued PlayStation games. According to Jefferies, many of these issues were due to the PlayStation having a 2D rasteriser and not a 3D rasteriser as was commonly assumed. "It had some hardware that would transform the polygon vertices into 3D space, but when it came to rasterise the polygons, it discarded any notion of depth and perspective and rasterised the triangles as 2D textures," he says.

"It was this that caused the textures to 'swim' unconvincingly as they approached the camera. These artefacts were compounded by the hardware's inability to clip polygons as they approach the camera clip plane. This caused polygons to flick off and

WE FELT WE COULD REALLY PUSH THE TECHNICAL ENVELOPE OF WHAT WAS POSSIBLE ON THE PLAYSTATION

disappear when they got too close to the camera. Texturing and clipping problems were particularly bad for racing games because having a low-down camera travelling down a track at speed exacerbated these issues. Our rendering engineer Pete Bratcher did a great job in rewriting the renderer that came with the Sony libraries to clip polygons correctly and adjust for the lack of perspective in the texture mapper."

While the programming

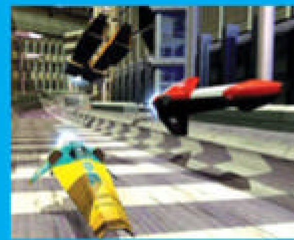


STAYING ON TRACK

From 20 to 8: how the Wip3out designers chose the best courses

TRACK DESIGN is one of the key elements to absolutely any racing game, so it comes as no surprise to learn that the *Wip3out* team took it very seriously. The artists produced around 20 tracks in total, but just eight of those were chosen for the main game, a process which entailed much play-testing by the team to ensure that the tracks were as perfect as reasonably possible.

According to lead designer Wayne Imlach, the criteria for selection was not only down to overall skill requirements, "But to provide advantages and disadvantages to the different craft manufacturers with tighter tracks favouring the slower yet nimbler ships." Once the tracks were chosen, "They were worked up into the final tracks with environment and buildings and spot effects and so on," continues Jefferies.



WHAT THEY SAID...



From the tastefully minimalist front-end graphics (laden with Designer's Republic intervention as in the rest of the game) to the flawless injection-moulded smoothness of the tracks, supremacy of construction is in evidence everywhere

PLAY, 1999

team got to grips with the engine, the audio crew began amassing the tunes. *Wip3out* took a slightly different approach to the music and it enlisted the superstar trance DJ Sasha to be the music director. Why? "Well, 1999 was the year of trance after all," says Jefferies. "He produced a selection of great tracks for us to use in the game, including *Xpander,* which did pretty well in the charts at the time. It was great working with him and he came to Leeds and met the team and got very involved. He went on a Global Underground tour where he projected videos of the game playing behind him as he DJed and there were some great times going to see Sasha play his *Wip3out* gig at Creamfields. Some of us even made it over to see him play Space in Ibiza."

Meanwhile, the art and design crew worked on a new set of tracks. Nicky Wescott was the head artist and she had been team leader on the first two titles. Her boyfriend, who later became her husband, was Mike Place who worked at The Designers Republic and carried out the graphic design of the game. "So right from the beginning it was like DR was on the team, which was massively important," adds Jefferies.

The levels were initially built with no dressing whatsoever – just basic polygon tracks floating in space. The artists started "by lofting a racing line in SoftImage and exporting it into the game engine," says Jefferies, of a drafting technique that allows for the generation of curved lines. "You could race the tracks at this point but, visually, they looked like a ribbon of track going through space with no background."

This was done because the team felt it was important to get the racing aspect feeling right before spending any time on set dressing, as changes to the layout would be expensive once scenery was built. "We spent quite a bit of time analysing the tracks from the earlier games and we derived a short 'track design bible' that highlighted the pros and cons of all the various track features you could include, including items, such as the width of the track, angle of corners, altitude changes, everything," recalls Imlach. "If you put something into the track design, there was an expectation of knowing to some degree how it might affect the game before you tested it. We didn't have time for random design. You needed to know what you were doing and have a reason for every corner, curve and crossover."

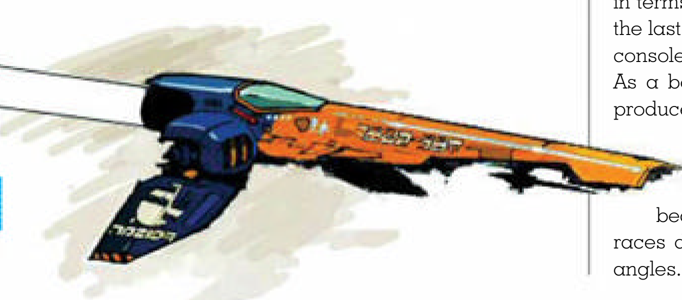


The visual style was similar to the previous *WipEout* games, producing a cool, underground, almost Japanese feel to the tracks.

THE TEAM HAD JUST NINE MONTHS TO GET THE GAME INTO SHOPS

The artists distinguished the game from *WipEout 2097* by using a different palette and cleaner lines, helped by the hi-res mode, but the game still conveyed the futuristic cityscapes and environments that defined the look of the game. "I think it felt a little more mature in terms of art style, which was appropriate as it was the last of the series to come out on the generation of consoles it was originally created on," says Imlach. As a bonus, four more unlockable test tracks were produced late in development "using the vector art style as a cheap way to introduce more tracks without the art overhead," Imlach adds.

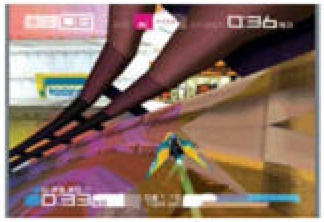
Wip3out was also given a replay function because the team believed that the high-speed races deserved to be viewed from different camera angles. Jefferies says the technical concept behind



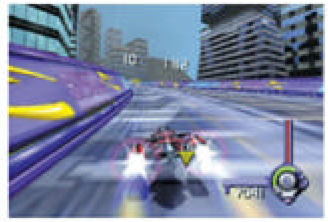
> A GAMING EVOLUTION WipEout > Wip3out > G-Surfers



With its styling, club music and fast-paced action, *WipEout*'s futuristic spacecrafts – and insane difficulty – became iconic.



G-Surfers had undisputed parallels with *Wip3out* including a two-player split screen mode and modern craft.



replays on the PlayStation was simple – "you recorded each button that the user pressed on each frame and then, for the replay, you simply played back each button press and the race would unfold exactly the same as it did the first time round" – but, in practise, retro-fitting replays to a game that didn't support them proved to be an immensely fiddly and frustrating task.

"All of the physics, artificial intelligence and random number generation had to be exactly deterministic, which is never the case," he recalls. "If you feed the same values into an AI system twice then you might expect it to give you the same result each time but, in practise, AI and physics systems have a degree of randomness built into them to make them unpredictable, so when you try and replay a race it looks different to first time around. When you add to this the fact that extensive randomness is used throughout the particle systems – which are different depending on camera angle (and of course camera angle is different in a replay) – then it becomes a huge spaghetti mess that you have to untangle to achieve this feature."

Not that the end result suffered. Indeed, replays looked great and the process was so efficient that the team was able to use some of the spare processing time to put some flare and trail effects on the ships. The look and feel of the game was stunning with the futuristic graphic design championed by The Designers Republic and a render engine displayed to its full potential. "The whole package ended up working very well together and consequently the game came away with the Best Design award at BAFTA for 1999," says Jefferies proudly.

The game coincided with the advent of the analogue controller and so, for the first time, the series was able to benefit from added support for these sticks. It had proven to be a popular control method and, given Sony's influence on *Wip3out*, it was something the coding team could not afford to dismiss. Even so, it was a controversial inclusion. "The nature of analogue input is very different to digital input and it ended up making the racing easier because analogue controls afforded the player more control over the input," admits Jefferies. "This upset some traditionalists who didn't like us releasing a version of the game where better times could be gained by using the DualShock."

But it wasn't as if the game was easy. It did have a difficult learning curve and this went down well with reviewers who raved over the game in both the specialist and national press which also praised the title for its graphics, split screen, new weapons and soundtrack. And yet sales of the game were sluggish. Not even a special edition released in Europe in 2000 could make it into an overwhelming success despite bringing different craft physics, older courses and four-person multiplayer to the table. The problem, says Jefferies, was the European-centric nature of the franchise and also because attention was switching to other, more advanced machines.

"*WipEout* was always a very European and UK series and so the relatively low sales compared to titles that sold across the world wasn't that surprising," Jefferies says. It didn't help, he continues passionately, that *Wip3out* was the first PlayStation title to ship with a new form of copy protection that meant even legitimate copies of the game would not play on a modded Playstation. "People who had modded their console had no choice but to acquire a pirated version of the game, which had the copy protection stripped from it," he says. "I don't know if this meant that we lost lots of potential sales but later titles no longer used that form of copy protection."

Of course, *Wip3out* wasn't the end of the franchise. It became Sony's baby, spawning more sequels including *WipEout Fusion*, *WipEout Pure*, *WipEout Pulse*, *WipEout HD* and *WipEout 2048*. *WipEout* games have since appeared on the PS2, the PSP, the PS3 and the PS Vita and it will, we are sure, come to the PS4 in due course, even taking into account the closure of developer Sony Studio Liverpool before the console launched. "Everyone loved *WipEout*," says Jefferies. "The slickness, the visuals, the graphic design, the music and the club culture had perfectly captured the PlayStation generation."





The overall look and feel of *Wip3out* was of a PlayStation 2 game. This was important, however, in order to sell copies at the end of the PSOne's life.







INTERVIEW

"WILD BILL" STEALEY

Created on the back of bravado, MicroProse became one of gaming's most respected companies of the Eighties and Nineties. Co-founder "Wild Bill" Stealey tells us more

John Wilbur Stealey Sr – better known as Wild Bill – co-founded the highly successful games company MicroProse in 1982 after pairing up with acclaimed programmer and designer Sid Meier. Stealey ran the publisher and developer for more than a decade, drawing on his background as a United States Air Force lieutenant colonel to influence a string of acclaimed military simulations. Now, 33 years later, he is the CEO of the online gaming firm, iEntertainment Network, which is set to launch a new series of mobile outdoor action sims, starting with *BowHunter2015*, as well as a fresh version of *WarBirds*. Has much changed? "It's all the same really," Stealey says. "Only I don't need to stand in front of GameStop and laugh and dance and show off games on the Commodore 64 anymore. We can use social media."

What was your first experience with gaming concepts?

When I was 16, I won a National Science Foundation competition and got to go to the Army Signal Research and Development Laboratories in New Jersey. I programmed helicopter sims, which got me interested in simulation. But my competitive nature came when I went to the Air Force Academy and I did what all air force guys do: pretend to shoot everybody else down and compete at everything.

Was programming and gaming in your mind at that time?

Not at that point. I graduated from the United States Air Force Academy as a lieutenant in the Air Force and trained to become a jet pilot. After seven years on active military duty, I went to the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania to learn about finance. I got a job as a management consultant at McKinsey & Company in New York. As a Wharton grad, my employers wanted me to do incomes, statements, balance sheets and all that boring stuff. But I'm a smart, lazy person so I found a timesharing language called XSIM. I built a financial model, which took me 20 all-nighters and created a simulation of the businesses we were consulting for.

When did you buy your first computer?

I was working at General Instrument as director of strategic planning and there

> **I'M A SMART, LAZY PERSON SO I FOUND A TIMESHARING LANGUAGE CALLED XSIM**

was a spreadsheet program called VisiCalc. I went to a shop to see a TRS-80, knowing it ran the software. Next to it was a machine making all of these gun noises, and I said, "What is that," and the computer sales assistant said, "Oh, that's just a toy computer". I [asked if] it did VisiCalc and he said, "Yeah". It was an Atari 800 and I bought it.

Did you play games on it?

I'd already played a game called *Star Raiders* and I'd played a *Star Trek* game at







EARLY SALES TACTICS

"WHEN WE MADE *Hellcat Ace*, I called computer stores and asked to buy the game. When they said they didn't have it, I'd yell at them and be an irate customer, saying things like, "What kind of computer store is this," before hanging up. Three weeks later I'd call again and say, "This is MicroProse and we have a game called *Hellcat Ace*". They would say, "We've been getting a lot of calls about that". I sold $200,000 of software with that oh-so-sophisticated marketing approach."



■ *Rex Nebular And The Cosmic Gender Bender* was created "to keep up with Sierra," says Bill. "The guys were tired of doing my military games but while the game was very good, it didn't make as much money."

the Air Force Academy, so I figured I could use VisiCalc on the Atari 800 and play games. How cool is that? That's when I met Sid Meier who shared my growing interest in software. But he was borrowing games and I said, "Sid, you can't borrow software," and he said, "Well, I'm not selling them or anything, I'm just looking at them." And I said, "They want you to pay to look at them". I decided not to join Meier's group at the time.

How did you and Sid go into business?
Three months later we were at a sales meeting in Las Vegas. I was the only finance guy and Sid was the only engineer. The salesmen had been telling us how cool they used to be and how good they were going to be the next day and Sid says, "Bill, I know where there are some games, let's get out of here." We were at the MGM Grand and there was a game room in the basement full of coin-op games. As we played, Sid kicked my butt at every game, but there was a *Red Baron* game there and since I was flying A-37B Dragonfly attack aircraft for the Pennsylvania National Guard, I said, "Come on Meier, I will kick your butt at this flying game". I scored 75,000 points. Sid sat down and scored 150,000 points. I was pissed. I asked Sid how he beat me so bad. Sid said, "I memorised the algorithms while you were flying and knew where the enemy was going to come up on the screen!" Sid said to me, "I could write a better game in a week," and I said, "If you could, I'd sell it". Fighter pilots don't like to be out-bragged.



■ *Hellcat Ace* was created as a mutual challenge between Bill Stealey and Sid Meier and it kickstarted MicroProse for the pair.

What game did he create?
Hellcat Ace. When he finished it, I wrote a four-page memo saying it sucked and it wasn't really about flying. He came back a week later with all of those things fixed and reminded me I had said I could sell it.

Was it an easy passage into games, then?
I did have to hock my car, my Volvo for $15,000 in the summer of 1984 to pay for the three employees I had. I took it to a pawn shop and the guy gave me $15,000. It took me two months to get it back.

Had you always been a gambler?
Wait, I am a fighter pilot! Every time you go against somebody in the air, it's a challenge. Scary, fun, and challenging every time and you cannot be shy.

How exactly did the MicroProse partnership work?
Sid was good at what he was doing, though I couldn't get him off the Atari 800 for about four years. I was enthusiastic about selling his games and making a real company out of MicroProse Software.

When did you leave your regular job?
About a year into it. I walked to my boss and said I have a little business on the side and he said, "Oh I heard". That was in 1984. Sid went full time a year later.

Did Sid like making the flight sims that MicroProse was so famous for?
Flight sims were not Sid's passion. They were mine. He made *Hellcat Ace* because I said I could sell it. He made *Chopper Rescue*, but only because he wanted it use two joysticks to play and it had never been done before. He wanted to find things he could do differently on computers. He also made *Floyd Of The Jungle*, which was a climb-the-ladder kind of game using four joysticks on the Atari 800. My three kids and I loved [it], but it never gained any traction.

SID IN THE BOX

"WE THOUGHT *CIVILIZATION* was a terrific game but we shipped 15,000 copies and got 14,000 back internally. The problem was, we could go to Sid's office and ask, "What do we do next?". We were getting tips and the public wasn't. I brought it back in and got my marketing people together. And, ding, the light went off: I said we need to put Sid in the box. We put science and military advisors in the game and it took off."

He also made *Solo Flight* in 1984, right?
That's because he had learned to line draw better. He was looking for techniques to improve what he was doing and he was learning as he went along. *Solo Flight* competed with *Microsoft Flight Simulator*, but whereas Microsoft was putting out $49 products and insisting retailers pay $44, I walked in with a $29.95 product that I was willing to sell for $14.57. The retailers bought 25,000 copies. In 1985, we also made a combat flight simulator, *F-15 Strike Eagle*, because I'd always wanted to fly the F15. A couple of guys converted it to the Commodore 64 and that's when things really jumped off.

***F-15 Strike Eagle*, in all its versions, sold more than four million copies, worldwide.**
Gunship did extremely even better. Former Commodore president Thomas Rattigan gave MicroProse an award for that game because Commodore determined that the



■ *Rick Dangerous* was developed by Core Design, but it was released on MicroProse's US label, MicroPlay. MicroProse had a UK label, MicroStyle.

game *Gunship* sold more Commodore 64 computers than any other game they knew about. *Gunship* probably had twice as many pirated copies.

You used to wear flight suits during your early days at MicroProse. Why was that?
I was the marketing guy. Who remembers John the MBA? Very few, but they do remember Wild Bill the Fighter Pilot. We got great press, everyone knew what kinds of games we did, and most MicroProse customers bought every one of our flight simulators for many years. I loved going to trade shows to display our flying games on giant screen TVs wearing my flight suit. The free press was great.

You and Sid stuck together. Why?
Sid was my friend and the guy I started first with. I was not going to pull a Wozniak on him. He was never comfortable with the business side of things, though. One time I asked him to come and see investment bankers in New York and put on a suit because all I had ever seen him in was tennis shoes, jeans, and a Michigan sweatshirt. I'm in my best three-piece suit and spit-shine shoes; he's in his tennis shoes, jeans, white shirt and black striped tie on a hanger and his Michigan sweatshirt. I said, "Sid, leave it here – we're going to New York, you're the geek, I'll be the businessman, let's go." We still raised money. He's my friend.

You also worked with other companies such as US Gold in the UK…
[Founder] Geoff Brown said, "Bill, I want to ship your products for you in the UK," and I agreed. But I went to the UK to talk to Boots about our products shortly after and the buyer was busy. I said to the secretary, "Is this your top-ten list," pointing to the wall. She said it was. I said, "The top eight of your top ten games are mine and if your buyer wants to sell these tomorrow, he had better talk to me." The buyer was aghast. He had no idea they were MicroProse products because they all said US Gold. We decided to set up our own UK office, which occurred about one year later.

Did you ever consider selling MicroProse?
I had a long meeting with Richard Branson in 1988 or 1989 before he started Virgin Interactive and I was pretty sure we were meeting to sell MicroProse to him. I was such a dumb bunny that I didn't say yes. I could have retired and started taking real golf lessons. But I loved being an entrepreneur even though it has probably given me my three heart attacks.

SID WAS MY FRIEND. I WAS NOT GOING TO PULL A WOZNIAK ON HIM

How did *Pirates* come about?
After *Gunship*, Sid looked around and did other things. Sid is a giant history buff. I gave him a book about the American Civil War for Christmas one year and gave me it me back six days later. I said, "Sid, didn't you like the book?" He said, "I loved the book, but I memorised it already and I don't need it." That's how brilliant Sid was. Even though we started doing a lot of games that he didn't participate in, we knew Sid could come in and made them better in the end.



"*Gunship* got us big in Europe," says Bill. "One employee said he was told [EA founder] Trip Hawkins said, 'Anyone could sell *Gunship*'. We had a great product!"


Sid Meier was so integral to MicroProse's success his name appeared on the box of *Pirates!* and *Civilization*.

Sid eventually left. Did it leave a hole?
Around nine years in, he said he didn't want to be a partner any more… but we remain friends to this day… I go and play golf with him every few years in Maryland.

You took time off too, didn't you?
I'd taken MicroProse public and the board said, "Bill, you've been doing this for ten years and you're a micromanager, so take a year off". I'd raised $30 million and I had hired a president for the US and a new MD to head up the UK. I went to make speeches in colleges about entrepreneurship and I played golf at all of these cool places. I was gone from January 1992 to September 1992.

Was it odd returning after a long period?
I came back to a different firm. MicroProse was always about cash bonuses for good work. If you got your game out on time and on budget, we put 25 per cent of profits aside for the teams that accomplished that hard job. Artists and programmers humped 80 to 100 hours a week towards a project's end to make the deadline. I came back and asked management what games we had ready and there were none. They had taken away my bonus programme, so the teams were not dedicated to finishing anything. We launched one US game in 1992 – *F-15 Strike Eagle III*. I went to Spectrum Holobyte in 1993 and it bought enough stock to take control of the company. It was a big mistake to take a sabbatical.

You eventually left and set up Interactive Magic. Why was that?
I was bored… I had a 250 mile, three-year non-compete clause after MicroProse was sold, but when that the company needed my signature on some legal documents, the three-year went out the window. I set up again and figured we'd do those sims once more. We made *Capitalism* and published military sims. We bought the *WarBirds* franchise and got the company up to about $25 million in sales.

The company has since become the iEntertainment Network and we are looking for beta testers at www.BowHunter2015.com.

GAME CHANGERS

DEVIL MAY CRY

Released: 23 August 2001 **Publisher:** Capcom **Developer:** In-house **System:** PS2



Dante's name from the original *Resident Evil* iteration, Tony, can still be seen engraved on his trademark pair of versatile pistols, Ebony and Ivory. They help him juggle enemies.

A curious mix of puzzle-solving, platforming and some of the most in-depth combat games seen back in 2001, Devil May Cry shot and slashed its way onto the PS2 from nowhere and changed the way action games worked forever…

WE SIMPLY WOULDN'T have the modern 3D hack-and-slash games if it weren't for *Devil May Cry*. Hideki Kamiya might be most famous nowadays for his ridiculous antics on Twitter, but back in 2001, his approach to game-making was the main reason for his notoriety. The game takes its cues from Capcom's older games – you can see that in the camera works, and in the intentionally *Resident Evil*-esque environments you fight through – but it only took a couple of seconds on the pad to realise that there was nothing else quite like *Devil May Cry* out there when it launched.

For a start, protagonist Dante was a breath of fresh air compared to the other sullen and mopey Japanese protagonists of his time. This is likely some of Kamiya's influence coming through, to be honest – the developer is known for his rebellious attitude and tendency to say *exactly* what he's thinking. Dante mimics this, with an additional cartoon veneer: the white-haired half-man, half-demon is one of the most unapologetically mouthy characters we've seen in gaming, sometimes to the point of comedy, often to the point of aggravation.

Devil May Cry began its life when Shinji Mikami asked Kamiya to make a new *Resident Evil* game – something more action-orientated than previous iterations of the survival horror franchise had been. Working with *Resident Evil* veteran Noboru Suigmora, Hideki Kamiya pitched a game where Tony – an invincible and ridiculously smart soldier, enhanced with biotechnology – would fight an isolated zombie outbreak on an island off the coast of some European country. As the premise took shape, Kamiya concluded that Tony's coolness wouldn't come through if you could only see him and experience his actions from behind, and so decided to drop the pre-rendered backgrounds from the game. Kamiya opted instead for a fully 3D and dynamic camera.

THE ANATOMY OF DEVIL MAY CRY

DANTE'S INTRODUCTION IS AN ODD MASH-UP OF STYLES AND CONCEPTS WHEN YOU BEGIN TO BREAK IT ALL DOWN



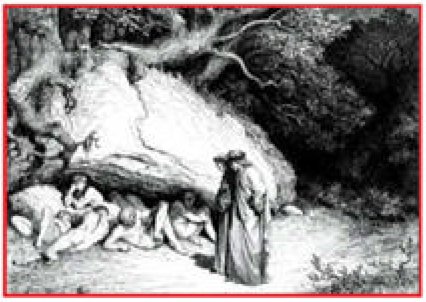
SPANISH ARCHITECTURE

★ When the team was still working on the soon-to-be-retitled *Resident Evil* game, they took inspiration from European architecture – most notably, Spanish archictecture. You can see examples of this in the gothic construction of Mallet Island, which is the first setting of *Devil May Cry*.



ONIMUSHA: WARLORDS

★ It was a glitch in the original *Onimusha: Warlords* game (also developed and published by Capcom, back in early 2001) and that inspired Kamiya to experiment with giving Dante the ability to juggle his many enemies with his guns and vicious aerial attacks.



DANTE ALIGHIERI

★ Surprising no-one, the lore of the entire series is heavily inspired by *The Divine Comedy*, the seminal poetic work of Dante Alighieri. The names of most of the game's characters were lifted directly from his work, such as Virgil and Trish, and the pattern continues in the sequels.

Mikami then weighed in, deciding this new ultra-quick and cool direction just wasn't in keeping with what *Resident Evil* was all about, and decided to scrap the idea. He convinced Kamiya, his team, and Capcom to carry on the project, though, under its own title. So Kamiya renamed Tony to Dante, swapped the zombies for demons and doubled down on the combat.

That's when *Devil May Cry*'s trademark combat really began to take shape – during a test of the game, Kamiya was fascinated by how Dante could keep enemies in the air if he jumped and attacked at the right time. He decided to make this a core mechanic in the game, adding a gunplay mechanic that would keep enemies in the air once launched so you could chain combos and do it in *style*.

The whole game was wrangled to fit around Dante and his new fluid, dance-like combat. Moves were created to allow him more mobility around the battlefield – lunges, parries, flips, area-of-effect bullet blasts; he was shaped into a finely-tuned killing machine. As a result, the game morphed into a mission-based structure, too, with each level rewarding you for style, overall damage and speed of completion. The open-ended structure of the *Resident Evil* games was deemed unsuitable for what Kamiya wanted to achieve with *Devil May Cry* – he wanted to be a sadist, to judge the gamers that bought his game. Critics argued the game was 'too hard' on release and Kamiya basically laughed at that.

IT WAS THE START OF THE DYNAMIC CAMERA THAT WOULD COME TO DEFINE THE PS2'S 3D-BASED OUTPUT

KEY FACTS

■ The PS2 version of *Devil May Cry* has sold over 2.2 million copies worldwide, making it one of Capcom's best-selling new IPs of all time.

■ The series' name comes from the shop Dante runs his demon hunting business from, which was revealed to have come from Lady saying 'even a devil may cry' because of Dante's might during the third game.

■ Dante's personality was based on the character Cobra from a manga series with the same name.

■■■ There were 3D action games before *Devil May Cry*, sure, but none of them had the focus on style and fluidity that Capcom's left-field release did. It showed what the PS2 was capable of early on in the console's life, and initiated a new trend of action gaming that relied more on skill and timing – like a rhythm action game – rather than the plodding, considered pace of the action games of the time.

It was also the start of the dynamic camera that would come to define a lot of the PS2's 3D-based output. It might have been a fairly clunky camera system in the first game, but it was slowly improved throughout the series' life on the console and, if nothing else, worked as a fantastic proof of concept for the loose camera in a high-octane action game like that.

Without *Devil May Cry*, we wouldn't have *Bayonetta*. The *Ninja Gaiden* games wouldn't have been shaped the way they have. From Software wouldn't have made the ridiculous (but amazing) *Ninja Blade*. It's arguable that *Demon Souls* took inspiration from Capcom's action game masterpiece, too, and *Resident Evil 4* certainly wouldn't be the game that it is today without the development team cutting its teeth on *Devil May Cry* and Mallet Island.



GAME CHANGERS

8 MORE GAMES THAT STARTED LIFE AS SOMETHING ENTIRELY DIFFERENT

DEVIL MAY CRY'S JOURNEY FROM A RESIDENT EVIL GAME TO A COMPLETELY ALTERED BEAST IS PRETTY COMMON KNOWLEDGE, BUT DID YOU KNOW THAT A LOT OF OTHER GAMES ACTUALLY CHANGED DRASTICALLY DURING DEVELOPMENT TOO?



STAR FOX ADVENTURES USED TO BE DINOSAUR PLANET

■ DINOSAUR PLANET WAS in development around early 2000. Rare were developing the title for the Nintendo 64 when Miyamoto visited. He noticed how similar the game was to the *Star Fox* series and asked the developer to alter the assets into *Star Fox 64*.



THE CANNED SABREMAN STAMPEDE USED TO BE DONKEY KONG RACING

■ ANOTHER RARE GAME, another twisting development… When Microsoft purchased Rare, it had to rejig a lot of its then-current projects to exorcise Nintendo characters. Donkey Kong was replaced with the studio's character, Sabreman, but the game was cancelled.



DR ROBOTNIK'S MEAN BEAN MACHINE IS A REBADGED PUYO PUYO GAME

■ SONIC THE HEDGEHOG is an internationally recognised symbol. The *Puyo Puyo* games… well, not so much. As such, Sega rebranded the game – with the exact same gameplay – as *Dr. Robotnik's Mean Bean Machine* for its release in PAL and NTSC regions.



GOLDENEYE 007 STARTED LIFE AS AN ON-RAILS LIGHT GUN GAME

■ GOLDENEYE 007'S DEVELOPMENT was a harried affair. The game was pitched as a side-scrolling platformer, but studio heads wanted to take a more *Virtua Cop* route. Over two years later, the semi-sandbox game released – an entirely different beast.



FINAL FIGHT BEGAN LIFE AS STREET FIGHTER '89

■ STREET FIGHTER SOLD so well that Capcom's financial arm asked developers to refer to the in-development *Final Fight* as a *Street Fighter* game and it was going to release with *Street Fighter* branding until late into development.



SUPER MARIO BROS. 2 IS A RE-SKINNED YUME KŌJŌ: DOKI DOKI PANIC

■ WHILE THE JAPANESE arm of Nintendo was developing a platformer based on Fuji Television's *Yume Kojo* mascots, America was obsessing over *Mario*. For the American release, the main characters were altered to Mario, Luigi, Toad and Peach. The rest is history.



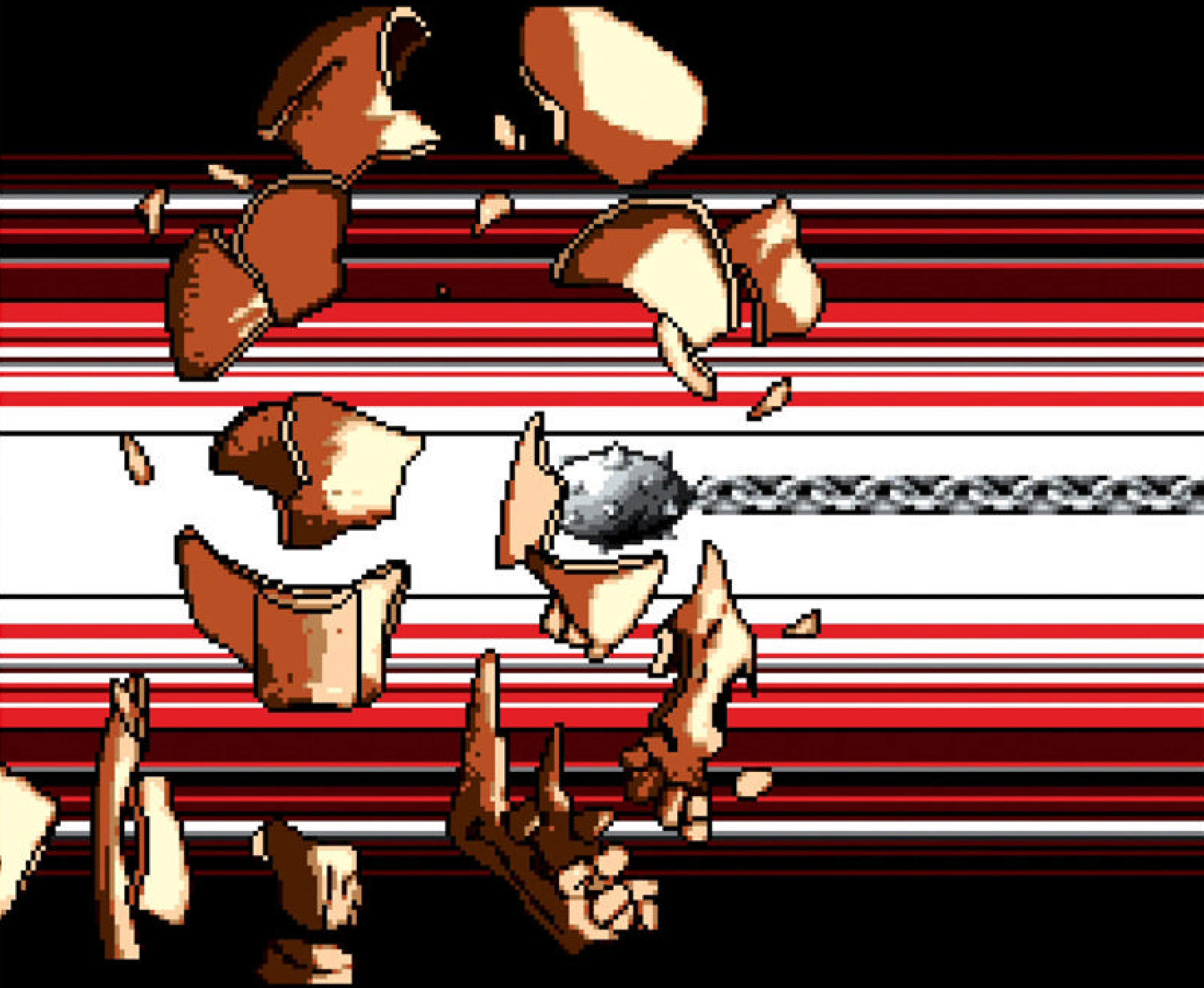
THRILL KILL WAS CANCELLED AND WU-TANG: TASTE THE PAIN WAS BORN

■ THE 3D FIGHTING game was built using practically all the same assets and engine architecture of *Thrill Kill*. Riffing off the popular *Mortal Kombat*, *Thrill Kill* pushed the violence a bit *too* far and funding was pulled. Activision swooped in, resurrecting the game.



SLEEPING DOGS WAS SUPPOSED TO BE TRUE CRIME: HONG KONG

■ IT STARTED LIFE when Activision funded United Front Games to create an open world game, tentatively called *Black Lotus*. But Activision wanted the *True Crime* moniker. Delays and budget issues lead to United Front signing its game to Square Enix.





BEST INTRO

CASTLEVANIA: RONDO OF BLOOD

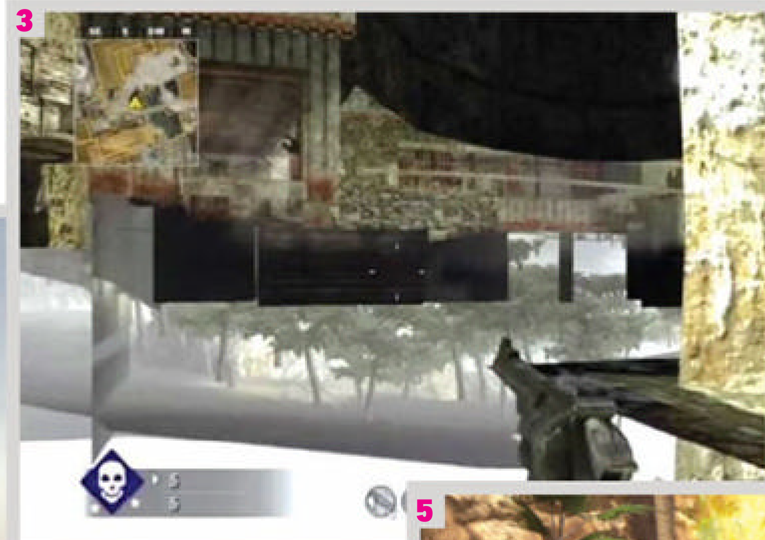
PC ENGINE CD **1993**

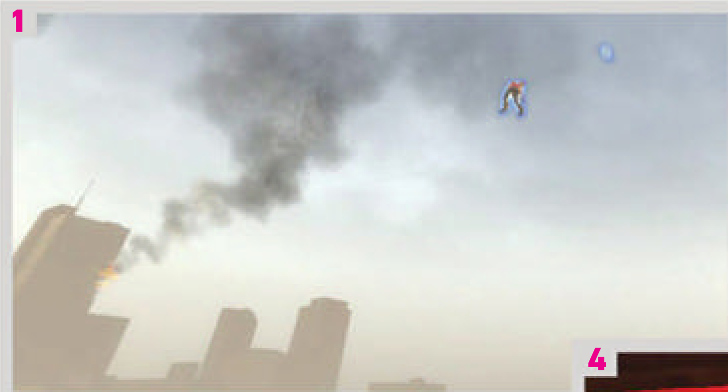
RONDO OF BLOOD never saw a Western release on the PC Engine CD – the earliest we saw it was on a Virtual Console release in 2010. And that's a damn shame, because the game was one of the better *Castlevania* games released in the early Nineties. The intro we've printed here is actually three stages of animated opening showing the 19-year-old protagonist, Richter Belmont, hurl his chained Vampire Killer whip at a skeleton under Dracula's control. It's a great way of showing you that *Rondo Of Blood* is abiding to some key *Castlevania* tropes – mainly that the main character is a Belmont, that he has a whip, and that you'll be battling the undead in a side-scrolling adventure. It's also a showcase of the gorgeous colours and sharp edges the CD was capable of rendering.

ESSENTIALS

10 CHEAPEST MULTIPLAYER EXPLOITS

■ In the wake of *Evolve*'s launch and the balancing issues that came with it, we've been thinking about multiplayer games and the difficulties that come in making them impenetrable. For every well-constructed game, there's another out there riddled with glitches. Sometimes, these glitches are patched sharpish, but other times they work their way into gaming infamy, to be collated as part of a list in **games**™ magazine…











Skywalking
Game: Left4Dead 2
Year: 2009

1 'Skywalking' was a glitch in *Left 4 Dead* that allowed you to travel above the typical combat zones and sometimes skip encounters altogether. It was triggered by throwing a pipe bomb at your feet near a precipice, then interrupting the throw-back animation with weapon switches. Keep switching, and eventually you'll 'walk' across to another platform somewhere. It was actually incredibly frustrating when playing as a zombie because it meant that a whole team of survivors could potentially bypass you altogether, and you'd have practically no chance at taking them down, which meant forfeiting a match altogether. Not great.

Roll Cancelling
Game: Capcom Vs. SNK 2
Year: 2001

2 One of the most famous glitches in a fighting game released to date, 'Roll Cancelling' was basically a glitch that allowed you to pull off special moves with invincibility added to any other properties they had in *Capcom Vs. SNK 2*. This happened because you'd cancel a roll in the first three frames, but the game would still think the roll was active, giving you invincibility for approximately 21 frames – the length of most supers. This glitch was exploited to its fullest, though, and the whole high level play of *Capcom Vs. SNK 2* ended up revolving around who could exploit it the most. And thus another competitive fighter lost its edge as a result.

Subterranean Camping
Game: Call Of Duty: World At War **Year:** 2008

3 Two of the maps in *Call Of Duty: World At War* are subject to a glitch that allows you to fall underneath the readily rendered ground, into a small limbo area of absolute nothingness below. When you're down there, you can view various items and assets in the world above – almost like looking up through a glass ceiling. For whatever reason, the impact that would stop your bullets passing through from above is discarded when looking *up* through the ground, so it means any players passing through your sneaky hidey hole in either the Upheaval or Castle levels are going to get (cheaply) pumped full of lead. Good for you, bad for them.

Right On (My) Cue
Game: Virtual Pool 64
Year: 1998

4 After you've lined up your shot in *Virtual Pool 64*, taken a pop at the ball and seen whatever balls you've potted go in, you can hit the 'R' button on your Nintendo 64 pad and switch to an overhead view of the pool table. From here, you can then actually move over the opponent's cue and rotate it at will. This is – you guessed it – ridiculous. Game-breaking, in fact. We played it in the office a little to test this out, and all you end up doing is skewing your opponent's cue – it's like walking into a bar and grabbing the end of their cue as they're trying to take a shot. Fortunately, the game featured no head butt opponent button.

BXR
Game: Halo 2
Year: 2004

5 Also known as 'melee fire', 'BXR' was a common glitch in the PvP sections of *Halo 2* and, to a lesser extent, *Halo 3*. The exploit enabled players to melee and fire almost simultaneously – by hitting the B, X and R buttons at the same time – insta-killing anyone that got in your way if you pulled it off just right. Though it *was* an exploit, it came to be a pretty integral part of competitive *Halo* play – in a 1v2 situation, it would give you a fighting chance of getting away on top. We were actually disappointed it wasn't in *The Master Chief Collection*, but ultimately it's the kind of unintended gameplay mechanic that was bound to be lost in time.



6



7





8



9



10



Fire, Walk With Me
Game: Dark Souls 2
Year: 2014

6 The PvP element of *Dark Souls* has enough potential for trolling without some cheap exploits (ever been cornered by a guy holding two man-sized shields for *two hours?* We have). But enter the Iron Keep, build your character to have 1,000 or higher defence and you can walk on lava to your heart's content. Trigger a Summon Stone, wait for some poor shmuck to enter your game, and camp on a boulder in the midst of flaming lava. They can't get to you from the spawn, but you're sat there, prepared with a greatbow, and can pick them off like fish in a barrel. As if trolling players in this game wasn't satisfying enough already.

Death Javelin
Game: Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 **Year:** 2009

7 There was an uproar back in 2009 as the most popular online game of the year, *Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare*, was being crippled by a cheap exploit that allowed players to arm their javelin launchers by 'cooking' a semtex grenade and stow them back in their packs, which would then explode upon death. The game locked the action once the weapon was stowed, priming it as you ran off and shot other players. This meant that your corpse was effectively a one-hit kill machine, and if you bolstered up your build with any other perks, you could effectively turn yourself into a team-wiping suicide bomber.

Ghosts of War
Game: Gears Of War 2
Year: 2008

8 Go up to a wall in the second *Gears Of War*, hold down the reload button and 'roadie run' into the wall. If you've pulled it off right, you'll know straight away: it'll look like you've instigated lag on your own game. The engine will try and catch up to you when you 'run out' of the glitch, but your enemies will see you still stuck in a wall. This basically makes you a ghost, and you can run around the map practically unseen, free to pick off your human prey in any way you wish. This was mostly used for boosting the 'Seriously 2.0' achievement, as well as the individual weapon-type kill medals that the game offered players. It was frustratingly cheap.

Super Bubbles
Game: Destiny
Year: 2014

9 *Destiny*'s PvP balancing revolves around three core tenets – your Super meter, your abilities and your heavy ammo. Take away any one of these, or alter them in any way, any match will hit a nosedive. So a glitch that means infinite super for the most deadly class at range (Warlock) means an instant win, or if you're on the opposing team, a crushing defeat. Get four Titans with the 'Alpha Lupi' chest piece, and two Warlocks with Obsidian Mind, and you can set up an impenetrable fortress in the middle of the map from which Warlocks or Hunters can spam super kills to on anyone that dares come near.

Keyboard Warriors
Game: Tony Hawk's American Wasteland **Year:** 2005

10 The *Tony Hawk* games were famous during the pre-online console era for creating and maintaining a pretty solid fanbase that was so dedicated, it had tens upon tens of online forums and active communities. During the PS2 era, it was possible to connect to other games via Ethernet, and *American Wasteland* took advantage of this for online games. Thing is, if you plugged in a USB keyboard and sent a message to someone via that, it would bypass any character limitations – meaning you could send a message of brackets and exclamation marks to someone, and *they wouldn't even have to open it*... just getting it in their inbox would crash their game.

THE VAULT



FROM BEDROOMS TO BILLIONS

DIRECTED BY: **NICOLA AND ANTHONY CAULFIELD** PRICE: **£30 – £50**

IT'S ONLY REALLY when you take a step back from it that you can appreciate what an extraordinary rise the games industry has had from its earliest days in the UK. That's exactly what this new documentary from Nicola and Anthony Caulfield looks to explore as it charts the birth of game development in the bedrooms of game-makers like Jeff Minter and David Braben, to the massive titles that influence gaming today like *LittleBigPlanet*.

Originally a Kickstarter project launched in 2012, the making of this documentary has been drawn out, but it's meant a great number of UK gaming luminaries have been added to the interview list. The likes of Peter Molyneux, Ian Livingstone and David Perry all make an appearance and really with the context such developers provide, the amazing journey they've all been on really gains new perspective. Available to purchase on DVD and Blu-ray, the special editions offer extended behind the scenes videos on the making of games like *Elite*, *Manic Miner* and another 150 minutes of interview recordings for you to enjoy. You can also watch a piece on what it was like making music on the C64 with Rub Hubbard and Fred Grey. It's basically a retro gaming fan's dream, packed full of big names with many interesting stories to tell. As far as gaming documentaries go, it's really up there with some of the best we've seen and it's been a bumper crop in recent years.



JACKET PRO F/Z

This surprisingly warm, but super thin sports jacket from Bjorn Borg is actually part of a collection tied into a new PC and Mac game called *First Person Lover.* All the clothing in the game is available on its site.

www.bjornborg.com



TIGHTS POWEL

More fitness gear from the Bjorn Borg collection, this time in the form of fitness tights, made from Hyrdo-Pro material so they're perfect for getting a little exercise without sweating buckets. Also good for lounging around the flat.

www.bjornborg.com



JACKET SUZI

This isn't a men's only collection. Male and female avatars are available in the game, so the clothing is too. Like this rather fetching bomber jacket that has its perfect match in the game. It's all a bit odd, but we're kind of into it.

www.bjornborg.com

GAMING CLOTHING



BLACK MESA EXPLORER

There's no sign of a *Half-Life* sequel, but so long as we keep buying gear perhaps Valve will see we mean business. Or just continue to dodge the question.
www.musterbrand.com



NOT A PIPE

Chronicling an important lesson for Mario that not all pipes should be explored, this shirt is also a reminder that the legendary Mario should not be our hero in terms of body image.
www.threadless.com



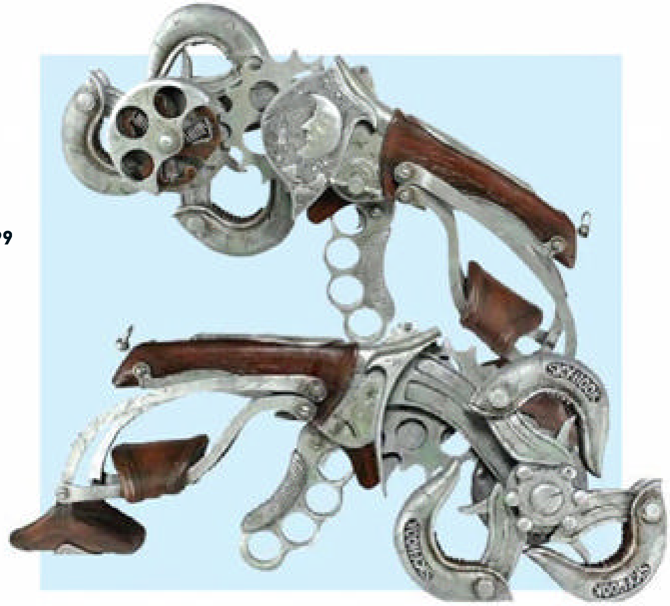
SUN BROS

This homage to the most co-op friendly of *Dark Souls'* Covenants, the Warrior Of Sunlight group (affectionately known as Sun Bros), is the best way to declare your undying allegiance to player-friendly gaming.
www.insertcoinclothing.com

BIOSHOCK INFINITE SKY-HOOK

SOLD BY: **FORBIDDEN PLANET** PRICE: **£79.99**

VIDEOGAME WEAPON REPLICAS have become insanely detailed and this recreation of the iconic *BioShock Infinite* Sky-Hook is one of the best examples of the craft. Booker's primary mode of transportation around Columbia really felt like a natural extension of the character by the end and leaping into the air as we decimated our enemies became second nature. The steampunk style of Irrational's creation shines through on this replica and makes it a standout piece.
www.forbiddenplanet.com





MASS EFFECT M-3

SOLD BY: **BIG BAD TOY STORE**
PRICE: **$319.99**

A GREAT DEAL of the weapon design in Citadel space is about ruthless efficiency and clean, stark lines. Some of the angular firearms used in *Mass Effect* were really memorable as a result, and if you started out as a heavy tech or biotic user you will be accustomed to using pistols like this M-3. This replica has some lovely texture work so you can really appreciate this weapon up close.
www.bigbadtoystore.com

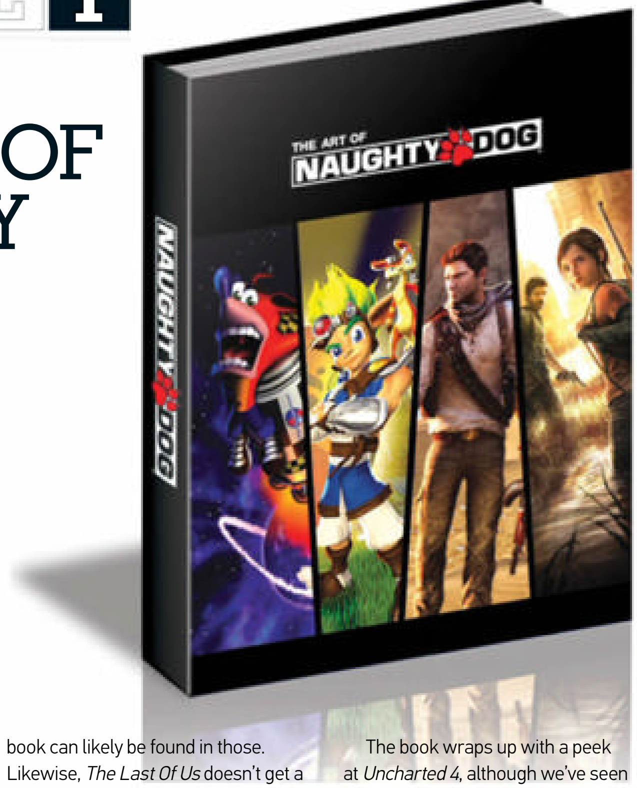
MISS MOXXI'S BAD TOUCH

SOLD BY: **GEARBOX** PRICE: **$650.00**

WE'RE EXPECTING DEMAND for these to be massive and so is Gearbox, which is taking deposits of $175 to reserve one of these high-detail replicas of the modified Maliwan Venom SMG made famous by *Borderlands'* Moxxi. That said, there are only 500 being made available so if you don't get your deposit down fast, it may not be around for very long. And why is it so likely to sell out? Because *Borderlands* fans are rabid and this is going to be snapped up by passionate Moxxi cosplayers from all around the world.
www.shopgearbox.com



THE ART OF NAUGHTY DOG



PUBLISHER: **DARK HORSE**

FROM CRASH BANDICOOT to *Uncharted 4* and a couple of projects that didn't even see the light of day, this collection spans the full life of Naughty Dog to date. With concept designs, renders and cover art variants abound, you get a pretty intimate look behind the scenes of one of the most creative and innovative studios around. There's also plenty of comment all the way through the book from the Naughty Dog team, recounting tales of the development process, how things changed and why certain decisions were made. On the whole we'd say it leans a little towards the older games like *Crash* and *Jak*, with comparatively less on the *Uncharted* titles. Then again, there are plenty of dedicated art books available for Nathan Drake's adventures, so references to original designs for Drake and Elena not featured in this book can likely be found in those. Likewise, *The Last Of Us* doesn't get a comprehensive treatment, but it has a book of its own available. Perhaps the most interesting segment is the one on projects that didn't make it, such as a much more realistic looking *Jak 4*, which may have been a little too creepy, considered before production on *The Last Of Us*, and an untitled sci-fi game with mechs and androids.

The book wraps up with a peek at *Uncharted 4*, although we've seen plenty more from this title since, and then a very nice collection of fan art. It's a nice touch at the end, actually, that we'd like to see more collections like this adopt.

www.darkhorse.com

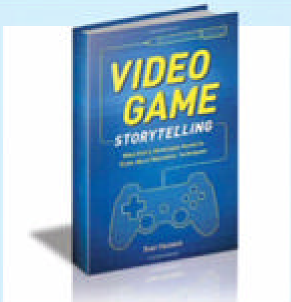
VERDICT 8/10



THE ART OF EVOLVE

Turtle Rock went through many iterations to land on its merry band of hunters and less merry band of monsters for *Evolve* and you can see all its thinking laid out in this collection. There may even be some clues as to where future DLC may go in terms of new characters, creatures and locations.

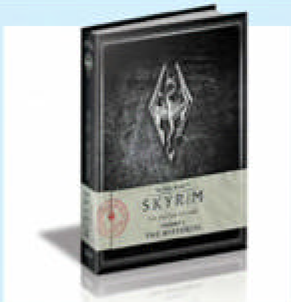
www.forbiddenplanet.com



VIDEO GAME STORYTELLING

This instructional text aims to give developers a basis in story theory, how to construct and maintain a narrative across departments and structure a tale to work in a game. There are a few game-makers out there who could do with reading a book like this.

www.forbiddenplanet.com



THE SKYRIM LIBRARY: VOLUME 1

This is the first in a collection of texts that gathers all the writing found in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. Remember those pages of books you grabbed? Now you can read them IRL. Volumes on *Man, Mer and Beast* and *The Arcane* are also on the way too.

www.forbiddenplanet.com

gamesTM

Imagine Publishing Ltd
Richmond House, 33 Richmond Hill,
Bournemouth, Dorset, BH2 6EZ
☎ +44 (0) 1202 586200
Web: www.imagine-publishing.co.uk
www.gamestm.co.uk
www.greatdigitalmags.com

Magazine team

Editor **Jonathan Gordon**
☎ 01202 586213
Editor In Chief **Ryan King**
Staff Writer **Dom Peppiatt**
Production Editor **Rebecca Richards**
Senior Art Editor **Andy Downes**
Assistant Designer **Kym Winters**
Photographer **James Sheppard**
Publishing Director **Aaron Asadi**
Head of Design **Ross Andrews**

Contributors

Luke Albigés, Adam Barnes, David Crookes, Sanne de Boer, Jon Denton, Ian Dransfield, Philippa Grafton, Stace Harman, Darran Jones, Matt Kamen, Alex Lemcovich, Dan Pinchbeck, Emma Quinlan, John Robertson, Chet Roivas, Chris Scullion, Drew Sleep, Nick Thorpe, Jordan Erica Webber, Josh West, Hannah Westlake

Cover Image

Uncharted 4: A Thief's End ©2015 Sony Computer Entertainment America LLC. All rights reserved

Advertising

Digital or printed media packs are available on request.
Head of Sales Hang Deretz ☎ 01202 586442
hang.deretz@imagine-publishing.co.uk
Account Manager Anthony Godsell ☎ 01202 586420
anthony.godsell@imagine-publishing.co.uk

International

games™ is available for licensing. Contact the International department to discuss partnership opportunities.
Head of International Licensing Cathy Blackman
☎ +44 (0) 1202 586401 licensing@imagine-publishing.co.uk

Subscriptions

For subscription enquiries email:
gamestm@servicehelpline.co.uk
☎ UK 0844 848 8429
☎ Overseas +44 1795 592 864
13 issue subscription UK – £52.00
13 issue subscription Europe – £70.00
13 issue subscription ROW – £80.00

Circulation

Head of Circulation Darren Pearce ☎ 01202 586200

Production

Production Director Jane Hawkins ☎ 01202 586200

Founder

Group Managing Director Damian Butt

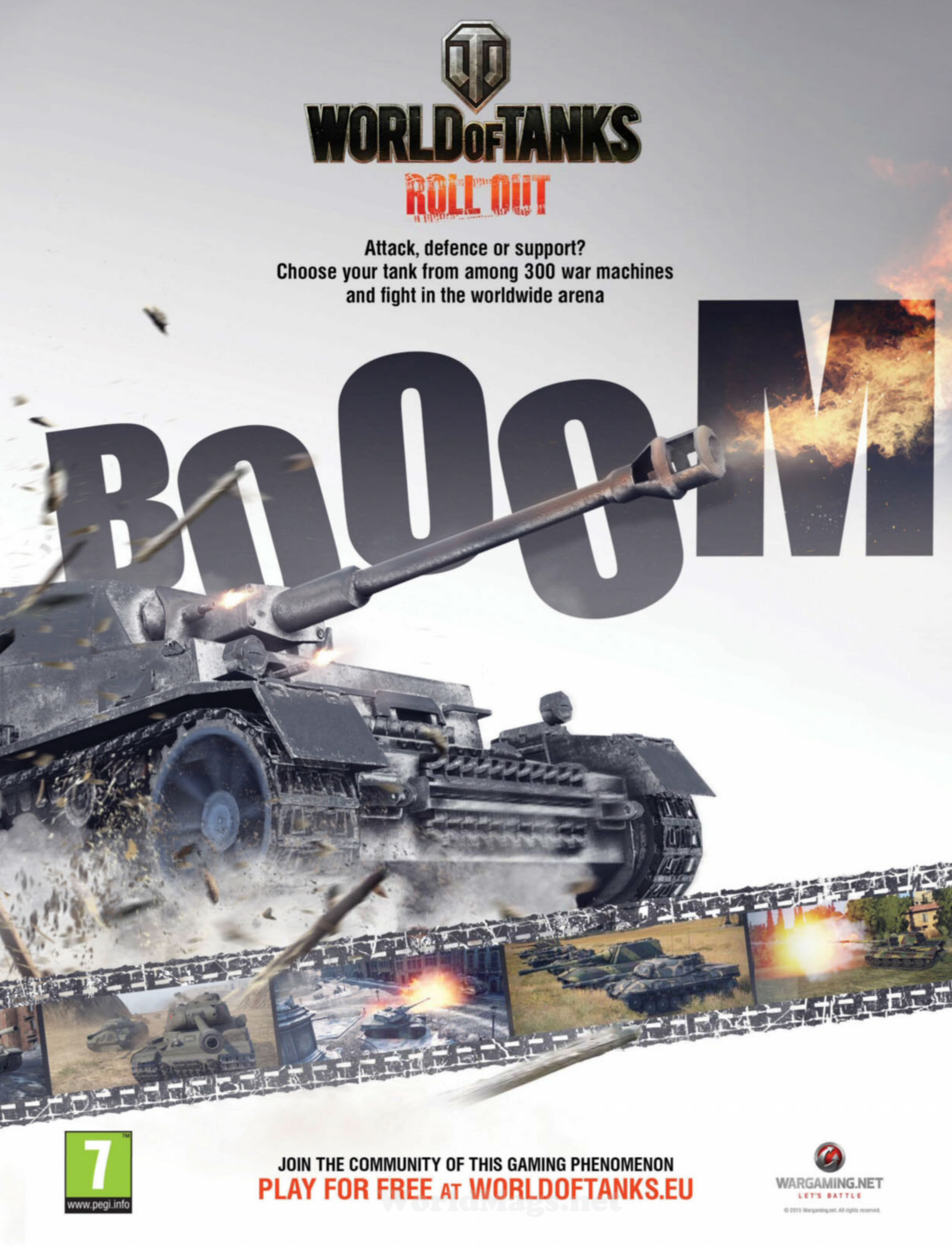
Printing & Distribution

Printed by Southernprint Ltd, 17-21 Factory Road, Upton Ind. Estate, Poole, Dorset, BH16 5SN
☎ 01202 628 300
Distributed in the UK, Eire & the Rest of the World by Marketforce, Blue Fin Building, 110 Southwark Street, London, SE1 0SU ☎ 0203 148 3300
www.marketforce.co.uk
Distributed in Australia by Network Services (a division of Bauer Media Group), Level 21 Civic Tower, 66-68 Goulburn Street, Sydney, New South Wales 2000, Australia
☎ +61 2 8667 5288

ISSN 1478-5889


MATSUKA
308415
SORRY, WE'RE PACKING THINGS UP.
BUT WE'LL BE OPEN FOR BUSINESS AGAIN ON 23RD APRIL


FOUR DISASTERS.
THREE SURVIVORS.
A MESSAGE THAT WILL CHANGE THE WORLD.
SARAH LOTZ
THE THREE
'This high-concept thriller is a blast'
The Guardian
'Really wonderful'
STEPHEN KING
'The finest thriller I've read in years'
SARAH PINBOROUGH
Watch the trailer at bit.ly/thethreebook


WORLD OF TANKS
ROLL OUT
Attack, defence or support?
Choose your tank from among 300 war machines
and fight in the worldwide arena
BOOOM
7
www.pegi.info
JOIN THE COMMUNITY OF THIS GAMING PHENOMENON
PLAY FOR FREE AT WORLDOFTANKS.EU
WARGAMING.NET
LET'S BATTLE